



M.R. STAXX

# FRRACTURED DESTINY

A RECLAIMED POWER  
BOOK 1

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*I am grateful to my husband, who patiently listened and brainstormed with me for countless hours as I painstakingly wrote this book. I also want to thank my writing coach; you know who you are...this book would not have been completed without your guidance and constant motivation to keep going.*

# CHAPTER ONE

I finally had the bitch. She'd been eluding us for decades, hiding behind men and women of power and authority. I couldn't get close to her until now. Her favors had run dry, and she was in our sights. The infamous witch of the deep, my nemesis, my downfall, the source of all my pain and deprivation. Of course, we don't ever call her by her name, giving her a name humanizes her. There is nothing about her that evokes humanity, so we call her the witch. She'd finally made a mistake and I was here to collect.

We crept down a dark tunnel. It stank like the deepest bowels of death, but given this evil cunt was one of the foremost sources of evil in our world, I wasn't surprised by the stench. She had hidden in one of the most violent places in the world, and lucky for me, it wasn't in the ocean I used to call home. My heart clenched at the thought of home. Even after so many years, the pain of everything I'd left behind because of my childish, naïve dream of true love was still sharp as a knife. What a fucking joke.

The charm, the façade of care, love and compassion—it had ruined me and liberated me simultaneously. The betrayal was the worst though, especially when it came from the thing you never thought would hurt you: family. I thought I'd never get over pain or learn to trust again. I mean, sure, my mistake had led to disastrous consequences, but I was little more than a child when I made the irrevocable decision to sign a contract with the most notorious witch in our world. All I wanted was to have my happily ever after with the love of my life, who'd turned out to be a real shitbag and in league with the evil cunt

who tricked me into signing that contract. They had manipulated me, played me for my magical abilities the whole time.

I blew a steady breath out through my mouth, unable to withstand the horrible smell in the tunnel. Alexa followed right behind me. The tunnel was so narrow that we could barely walk without our shoulders touching the slick green walls. I could hear her harsh breathing; trying to keep her breakfast down, I'm sure. I was doing the same. Solara and Mara walked behind her along with a few of our warriors. I didn't want to take any chances. Another break in the tunnel forked right, but our informant had told us to always stay to the left. Taking a wrong fork in the tunnel would lead to deadly traps or even more unwelcome surprises that we wanted to avoid. I hoped the informant hadn't double-crossed us. The bastard looked like a conniving weasel, but what choice did we have? Our leads had gone cold just as we were closing on the witch.

I hooked left, quickly moving to the next fork, and a left again. I had to stay focused and remain optimistic that she was here. She'd know we were coming, so we needed to be prepared. My single fucking power, *air*, was no match for her magic, and that's why we'd brought extra help. The mercs we chose were magic wielders; elementals for sure, but not human. We picked them up at the last port through a common contact, someone I only dealt with when things got shady. They'd cost a pretty penny, so much so that a quarter of my fortune was now depleted paying for this moon shot.

Up ahead the tunnel seemed to brighten. I stopped and held up my hand for the rest to stop as well. I turned slightly and signaled Alexa to douse the torches. She repeated the command down the line. We were blanketed in darkness within seconds, with only that dim light ahead as guidance to our destination. Alexa grabbed the back of my tunic, letting me know she was there to support me. My sister, not by blood but by trial, gave me the encouragement I needed with just that touch. I took a deep breath through my mouth, keeping my focus ahead. I inched forward much slower than before, able to see only an arm's length in front of me. We worked to stay

as quiet as possible—easy to do, given the ground was made of solid limestone.

As we neared the light, we heard voices. “Those fucking bastards will pay for their insolence.” It was her, the witch. She was there. Finally! My adrenaline spiked and the air around me swirled. I was immediately yanked back by my tunic and reminded to stay calm.

“What did you expect?” a man said. “That they’d continue to roll out the red carpet when they found out who was after you? Please. They’re more interested in self-preservation than helping a lost cause.” The man’s voice sounded familiar, but we were still too far away to make it out.

“That’s not the point. I gave them their life of luxury and kept their disgusting secrets, even contributed to their sick fantasies as part of our dealings. And yet, at the first sign of danger, they abandon me and run away with their tails between their legs. Cowards. There is no place they can go to hide from me, once I deal with this threat on my own.”

The witch’s voice was sultry and compelling, calling forth your innermost desires. It was one of the reasons I’d fallen under her spell. It was said that she was part siren, but then, they also said she was part demon. No one knew what she really was, only that she had immense power. Power that could crush an ordinary person. But because of who I was and the contract we had signed, she couldn’t harm me, even with her deadly magic. At the same time, I couldn’t kill her, which only deepened my rage and primed my one elemental power for battle. At least I could cause her pain—physical pain, which would have to do. The rest was already arranged to ensure she would suffer.

Alexa tugged gently on my tunic again, asking me what we were to do next. I nodded my head once, letting her know we needed to keep going. I continued to creep forward, all senses alert for traps or surprises. All was quiet after the initial exchange of words, which meant they had either heard us or sensed something was awry. I clenched my throwing daggers and kept moving forward. The tunnel ahead gave off enough light that we could now see the shadow of the cavern we were



preparing to enter. It was wide, filled with dim white light from the algae covering the stones lining the walls. I stayed back far enough that I hoped they couldn't see me. I took stock of the cavern and tried to locate the witch and her guest. I leaned forward slightly and—motherfucker, if it wasn't the bastard who'd destroyed me standing next to the witch.

I edged back, again trying to control my breathing. A rush of destructive energy built inside me. Alexa touched my shoulder and squeezed, letting me know they were ready when I was. I closed my eyes and focused on my energy, containing it, preparing it, making sure we were of one intent. Disable them and let the mercs do what we hired them to do. Alexa, Solara and Mara would flank me to give me time and protection to distract the witch so we could disable her. Except we hadn't planned on taking two people on. We would have to deviate from our plan and split up. Huffing a breath, I turned to my crew and wished once again that I could speak. Instead, I relayed what we needed to do through sign language which had been our primary form of communication for two hundred years. I signed the change to my crew with my hands. I was sweating with anticipation and adrenaline. We finally had her, but she was a tricky bitch and slippery as hell, so we needed to move fast.

I leaned forward again and peeked out from the entrance. The witch was standing closer to him, rubbing her hand on his arm. "Come, you know this is not why you came here. To speak to me about those assholes who left me—and you, by the way. I know what you need." Her voice turned possessive.

Fucking hell, she was using her power of compulsion. I leaned back and signaled everyone to put their ear plugs in. We knew this was a possibility, that she would entice everyone to follow her will with her voice. Right before I got my ear plugs in, I heard a masculine groan followed by slurping noises. Curious, I quickly inserted the plugs and leaned forward again to see what was happening.

The witch was now leaning over him facing his feet. She was fully nude and straddling his face on a large-canopied bed that occupied the center of the cavern. I could see her head

bobbing, moving up and down, and realized she was sucking him off while he devoured her pussy. What the hell!

She started to fuck his face, moving her hips in tight circles to get the full effect. He grabbed her ass hard, digging his nails into her ass cheeks and then proceeded to move his hand between her cheeks. The angle kept me from seeing where his hand disappeared to, but whatever he was doing drove her into a frenzy. I turned to look at her as she took him all in, choking on his cock like her life depended on it. Then she pulled back and her teeth elongated to jagged points. Ruthlessness bled into her visage; the beauty in it was mesmerizing, almost painful to behold. I held my breath, wanting to look away but unable to. I was transfixed. My body's reaction was confusing. On the one hand, I was disgusted by what I was seeing, but it was erotic, nonetheless. I stood still as I watched her lean forward and gently lick his cock from stem to tip, cradling his balls with her right hand, fingernails scraping across the skin.

I couldn't hear anything but could see he was turned on by it. He started attacking her pussy with his mouth more urgently. Her face said it all: she was close to coming. Her breasts bobbed up and down as she continued to stroke him with her tongue and scrape his balls and cock with her nails and teeth. She suddenly bit down, and I saw him jerk and bow up painfully, but he didn't stop his ministrations. She sucked on him hard, and I could see her cheeks hollow out as she drank. I quickly looked to him, and he was pumping his hand in and out of her ass cheeks, his face still buried in her pussy. She shifted suddenly and stood up; his rock-hard dick stood at attention, blood running down the sides.

She said something to him, and he quickly rose and bent her over the bed. I could see his profile—he was the same gorgeous fucker that had lied, cheated and ultimately broken my sixteen-year-old heart. My anger rose again, and I prepared to enter the cavern. I looked back at Alexa, and she had the same fierce expression on her face she always wore before battle. She nodded once, telling me they were ready.

I turned back to the cavern and saw that he was pumping away behind her while she fingered herself. From this angle, I could see that he was fucking her in the ass, spreading her cheeks to see himself penetrate her fully. He was ramming it in with powerful thrusts, the bed shaking with his movements. His right hand reached up and grabbed her long green hair and yanked her head back painfully. She arched without removing her hands, still ministering to her pleasure. He suddenly pulled out and flipped her over and turned her to face him again with his hand still fisted in her hair and his other roughly pinching her right nipple. She smiled at him, completely in thrall with their sex acts. He kissed her brutally hard and then pushed her to kneel and guided her head back to his cock. The same cock that just came out of her ass. She took him in again, throat working to accommodate his size...and I gagged. He fucked her face aggressively, even violently—I couldn't look away—and then she pulled back again and bit him a second time. This time he stiffened and pulled her head closer, making her take his cock in fully. She grabbed his ass and pulled him closer. Working her jaw up and down, I could tell she was still biting as she sucked.

He came with a shout, firmly holding her head, making sure she swallowed his seed. I could see the release of tension on his back and shoulders; he was fully sated. She pulled back and looked up at him, his hand gently cupped her face. I read her lips, "Now," she said. She lay back and splayed her legs wide and peeled back her pussy lips while rubbing her clit furiously. He fell on his knees and gorged on her juices like it was his last meal. She closed her eyes in pure bliss, a serene expression on her face. This was when we moved—when she least expected it.

I quickly advanced into the cavern and hid behind several large crates. The place was more of a storage than a living space, with crates stacked in the corners, as if waiting to be carted off. The bed was about fifteen feet from the crate I chose. Alexa stayed with me while Solara and Mara found hiding spots opposite and adjacent to my left. I peeked around and found that he was still devouring her pussy; the witch looking like she was finding great pleasure in it. All of a

sudden, she arched up off the bed, and I heard a loud cry of pleasure even through my ear plugs. It seemed she had finished. As she came, his head bobbed double-time, arms wrapped around her outer thighs, holding her in place while he consumed her physically. Disgusting shit.

I blew a gentle breeze that only touched my team, signaling them to move in. I closed my eyes and gathered my power. I could feel the mercs do the same, the energy in the room raising the temperature. We were careful to keep it as contained as possible; leaking energy would alert her. All at once, we released our energy.

I released a whirlwind of air targeting both prone figures, who had completely collapsed after fucking each other's brains out. I pinned them to the wall, holding them there. I couldn't look at them while doing this because it was taking all my concentration to keep the witch immobile. Fuck, she was strong. I could feel my energy being sucked in and started to panic. I knew she could absorb energy and rebound it back on the wielder, effectively taking them out of commission for a few hours.

I pulled my energy back, which also allowed her to use her energy to push off the wall and access her immense power. I felt the energy she was gathering building; my ears began to pop from the pressure of holding her as I raised a shield to protect myself from the blast that was coming. It was beginning to feel like things were about to take a turn, and not in our favor. I looked to Alexa and gave her the signal to move on to the next part of our plan.

## CHAPTER TWO

Alexa whipped out from the opposite side of the crate where I stood. She lifted her bow and fired right at the witch's black heart. At the same time, the witch released the power she held, lifting everyone in the cavern and tossing them against the stone walls.

I felt my ribs crack and one of my ear plugs popped out. I could hear the clang of swords, and as I painfully got to my feet, noticed both Solara and Maya were engaged in fending off Reynault, my former lover and the witch's pet. The speed at which he swung his sword was dizzying, but Solara and Maya held their own. Their synchronized dance of swords was something to behold. My eyes darted to the mercs and then the witch. They were battling against one another. With three against one you'd think they'd have the upper hand, but she fended off their attack with ease.

She glanced in my direction and smiled—fucking *smiled*. I could hear the whisper of spells from the mercs, but her mouth didn't move. As our eyes met, her smile grew into a smug grin. With the flick of her hand, the mercs went flying, slamming against the cavern wall.

Her attention turned to me. “Ah, my precious darling, you've finally found me.” Her voice slipped under my mental defenses easily. So much for all my preparation.

I gritted my teeth and didn't respond; instead I stepped from behind the crate and squared off. I looked at her more closely. She was still fucking beautiful, even as she rotted internally from her sins and crimes. None of that ugliness was

reflected in her image. Dark-green hair cascaded in waves down her back, her face like something carved out of every man's fantasy: high cheekbones, large, brilliant-blue oval-shaped eyes, arched brows that were a shade darker than her hair and a full, pouty mouth. She had a curvy yet slender figure and was on the petite side, a little shorter than me, but her presence was that of a goddess.

She was created to fulfill every person's sexual fantasy, and she used it to her fullest advantage. I took a fortifying breath and focused on our plan. I needed to give my team time to get in place. We only had this one shot to disable the bitch. I gathered my energy, readying to assault her with air. She winked at me, that smug smile still in place. My stomach clenched and my chest filled with rage. This disgusting whore would never harm anyone again. I opened myself to my power, filling up my well more than ever before.

I kept her focus on me as I confidently marched toward her. She didn't move a muscle, her naked glory out for everyone to see. She couldn't give two shits about who saw her, likely even enjoyed it. As I drew closer to her, I noticed my team getting into position. I hoped we could still disable her. I could still hear the ringing and clanging of swords as Mara and Solara battled Reynault. I couldn't worry about them; my goal was to contain the witch, and my time was up.

I stopped ten feet in front of her. Alexa positioned behind her with the mercs backing her up. I hoped that our plan would be good enough to finish this once and for all.

"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" She spoke softly, but I could hear her clearly, as if she was whispering in my ear. I twitched slightly, forgetting that I'd lost one of my ear plugs. I didn't bother responding.

"You finally found me after *eons* of looking. I bet this is an astounding moment for you. I will let you have your moment, but then I will kill all your friends and let you watch as I slowly bleed them out, one by one. This has turned out to be a good day after all." She grinned, showing her sharpened teeth, dropping her glamour and giving me a good view of what she truly looked like underneath.

If it was possible, she became even more alluring, more beautiful, but with a monstrous edge she lacked before. Her cheekbones were sharper, her eyes more jewel-like, her hair constantly moving and seeking like it was a living thing. I felt a strong pull in my sternum, almost like she was drawing me in. Taking a few steps, I caught myself and quickly put my mental walls up. She was doing to me that which she had done so many years ago: she was trying to compel me to submit to her power.

“I see you’ve learned a thing or two since we last saw each other. Your air ability has grown, and you’ve managed to build up your mental strength. Such a pity neither of those things will help you or your friends today.” She suddenly turned and whipped her arms out, but my team was ready. The mercs threw up a protection barrier over Alexa and themselves that vibrated with the impact from the power the witch sent their way. She’d dismissed me, given me her back, but I knew better—she was strong enough to shield herself from any attack, even from behind. The only way through was iron.

Alexa couldn’t use her fire ability because it would disrupt the shield, but she could fire arrows at the witch, which was exactly what she did. They had no effect except to distract the witch.

The witch knew the best way to hurt me was to hurt my family, and Alexa, Solara and Mara were part of that family. “She will miss you dearly, girl,” Alexa flinched at the onslaught of power the witch sent against the shield protecting her. “But don’t worry, I will make your death as painful as possible.”

I jumped into action. I grabbed my snake whip from the holster strapped to my back and cracked it toward the witch. I aimed for her arm, but instead the whip wrapped around her neck. I hadn’t had much practice with it and my clumsy attempt lacked precision. But it would work to neutralize her power regardless—the whip had been outfitted with iron beads in the braiding.

Her gasp echoed off the walls and she quickly moved her hands to untangle it from her neck. Steam rose from her skin

as the iron did its work. Not wanting her to escape, Alexa and I raced to stop her. I reached her first and roughly grabbed her hands, struggling to keep her from untangling the whip around her skin. For such a small person, she was immensely strong. Alexa reached us just as we fell to the ground together. She grabbed a fistful of the witch's writhing green hair and slammed her fist into her face; blue blood gushed out of her nose and her eyes rolled back into her head. She was unconscious, but that wouldn't last long.

We quickly hog-tied and gagged her and wrapped an iron-coated garrote around her neck, tying it in the back to weaken her ability to use her power. Once she was secured, I forced a sleeping potion we'd created to keep her sedated down her throat.

We still had to take care of Reynault, who was beating back Solara and Mara's attacks. Alexa and I moved swiftly to help them while the mercs guarded the witch. Solara had a deep gash running down her left arm, rendering it useless in the fight, but she kept batting Reynault back with her sword arm while Mara protected her left side. Both of Mara's legs were injured, her leggings wet with her blood. Reynault looked fresh as a fucking daisy. He launched into a series of maneuvers that made him look like a tornado of deadly blades, aimed at separating my friends so he could pick them off one at a time.

My fear for their lives spurred me on. I called on my blade and it appeared in my hand, while I quickly drew my dagger with my left. I glanced at Alexa: she had both short swords out and ready, a determined look on her face, and was running for all she was worth. We knew we didn't have much time.

Reynault was so intent on the fight with my two friends that he didn't hear us bearing down on him. At the last moment, though, he turned slightly, disabusing me of my assumption that he hadn't heard us coming from behind.

The man was a genius with a sword, and it was never more evident as we all started fighting for survival. He held Alexa and me off with ease with a few moves I had never seen. We immediately went on the defensive as he somehow duplicated



his sword into two blades. He was aggressive in his pursuit of me, specifically, a manic gleam to his eyes. It took everything I had just to block his advance. Alexa, Mara and Solara came at him from all sides, trying to find an opening, yet somehow he kept them at bay. His focus was on me.

“You still look as delicious as I remember. Do you still make those mewling noises when you come? I do miss making you scream with my cock deep inside you, making you believe I was your one true love. How naïve you were, and selfish. But I couldn’t complain—you were *so* eager to please. Do you miss me?” His voice slithered over my skin, burrowing itself into my senses, trying to influence me as he once had when I was barely a woman. I grimaced as I gritted my teeth and put my mental walls up. He wasn’t wrong; I had been selfish and naïve, and I had suffered for it. But I wasn’t that naïve child anymore.

His chuckle cut through my concentration as I kept my defenses up, fighting him off. He then turned into a whirlwind of blades, pushing my friends back. That gave me time to reach into my pouch and grab the one thing that could stop him: a time-freeze potion. It wouldn’t affect us because we had injected ourselves with the nullifying serum before we entered the tunnels, but he wouldn’t be so lucky.

I threw it forcefully on the ground near him and then used the little reserves of power I had left to push the fumes emanating from the broken container into his face and up his nose. He had no choice but to inhale. As soon as the potion was in his system, he froze in place and Alexa sliced his head clean off. Breathing hard, we stood motionless as his head rolled away, his face showing an expression of surprise. Bastard probably thought he was invincible. And maybe without the potion he would have been.

Mara collapsed, and we rushed to help her. She had lost a lot of blood, and we quickly checked her wounds. They weren’t life threatening but she would require time to recover. I didn’t know how she had stayed on her feet so long. Must have been pure determination and grit. I grabbed her face and signed that she would be okay.

We'd brought a few other potions with us, and I needed to get them from the mercs. I ran over to them, checked on the witch, who was still unconscious, and then looked at the merc with the potions, signing that I needed one. He looked at me in confusion and glanced toward Mara, Solara and Alexa, and understanding dawned. He nodded and reached into his pouch, retrieved two vials and handed them to me. These elixirs wouldn't heal my friends completely, but they would give them enough strength to get back to our ship, *The Miscreant*, where our healer, Leanne, could patch them up for fast recovery.

I sent my sword to the ether as I jogged back, my body on fire from the bruising I got from that powerful blast of energy the witch threw at us. My bones felt brittle now that the adrenaline had worn off. I reached my friends and fell to my knees, opening a potion and giving one first to Mara, then Solara. Alexa tried to help Mara, but she shrugged her off.

"I can do it, I'm not an invalid." She sounded exhausted, but that wouldn't change her stubborn streak. I smiled because I knew from that small display of temper she would be okay. She put the vial to her lips and tipped her head back. She grimaced at the taste, but otherwise was unaffected.

Mara glanced over to Solara, who stoically took her own vial between her fingertips and drank it down swiftly. She blinked in surprise. "This shit packs a punch." Her face flushed with the effects of the elixir. I looked at Mara, and her reaction was less apparent. Possibly because her injuries were more extensive. I signaled that we needed to head back to the ship.

Solara stood up, cradling her left arm. I rose with her and took off my belt and wrapped it around her torso, holding her arm in place. I could hear Mara grunting with effort to stand. I cinched the belt so it was snug and wouldn't jar her arm and nodded to Solara. Next came Mara, who was quietly trying to stand on her own without Alexa's help, gritting her teeth in her effort to stay upright. I made eye contact with Mara and expressed my concern, signing that she should accept Alexa's help, it would speed up the process of getting back to port. She

pressed her lips together and gave me a stiff nod. She placed her arm around Alexa's shoulders, face white with pain.

I bent down to look at the gashes on Mara's legs, and it looked like the bleeding had slowed down. While I was occupied with Solara, Alexa had placed tourniquets on both legs, across Mara's upper thighs. It had taken her belt and Mara's to get the job done, but it helped to slow the bleeding. I glanced up at Mara, who was clenching her jaw tight with a hard, determined look on her face. We needed to get her back as soon as possible.

I marched over to the mercs, who had reinforced the ties securing the witch. One of them had covered her in a burlap sack head-to-foot and was in the process of hoisting her up on his shoulder. They had created an illusion that disguised her shape so that no one would suspect we carried an unconscious body. I allowed myself a moment to feel a little hope that things would soon be back as they should be, with me returning to my family. The contract had been an albatross around my neck, dragging me into dark worlds and darker deals to gain the freedom I naïvely gave up in my youth. I felt butterflies in my stomach. I took a deep breath and signaled that we should go.

I then remembered the headless corpse of my ex-lover. We would have to bring him as well and give him a sea burial. As much as I thought he didn't deserve an honorable send-off, I couldn't leave him here. Alexa, Solara and Mara waited at the tunnel entrance with one of the mercs carrying the witch. I looked around, spotted my throwing knives a few feet away and ran over to pick them up. These were gifts; I couldn't bear to lose them. I must have displaced them during the fight. I put them in their holsters on either hip, then ran to join the others.

## CHAPTER THREE

We made quick work of the tunnels, exiting through an alley just off the fish market. The stench of dead fish greeted us. As we stepped out, I ran out in front of the team, making sure the way was clear. I grabbed the bag with light cloaks we'd stashed by the barrel a few feet from the alley entrance and tossed the cloaks to my crew, including the mercs. I looked at Alexa and signed that I was going to take a quick scan of our surroundings and that they needed to wait for me to return. She nodded her understanding and whispered what I'd shared with the others.

I put on my cloak and stepped out into the market. Our ship was located about two blocks down from the alley entrance, but soldiers periodically patrolled this area, and I wanted to make sure we had a clear path. I walked a few feet to my right, pretending to look at the stalls' wares. The market was a blend of colorful food, clothing and language. It was organized chaos, people's voices all speaking at once, some in amiable tones and others in frustration or even anger as they negotiated with the market vendors. I walked down a bit farther just to make sure there was no trouble in our path. Not seeing any sign of it, I walked back as fast as I could without drawing attention and gave the *all-clear* sign to the rest of the group. We had agreed to head to the ship in groups of two or three so as not to draw any suspicion.

Alexa went with the merc carrying the witch while the two remaining mercs walked in front just in case we came across trouble. I walked with Solara and Mara. Mara now needed more support but was still able to walk on her own. I signed to

her, asking if she was good with walking, and she scowled at me and gave me an angry head nod. I gave her a slight smile, my way of letting her know I understood her. I'd been in her position many times and didn't like feeling like an anchor holding everyone back. But my friends always took care of each other, and I knew her reactions really stemmed from getting hurt, not about our offer to help her.

We made our way to the ship. I kept my hood up as did everyone else. Most of the people frequenting the market did as well to protect themselves from the glaring heat of the sun. We each wore nondescript colors, to blend in. We arrived at the ship a short time later without incident. The merc carrying the witch took her below deck with Alexa following behind. We needed to secure her and disable her powers, so we had created a special room for her where she'd be surrounded by iron. It affected most of the people on the ship, effectively protecting them from the witch and reducing our risk of someone setting her free because she made them an offer they couldn't refuse.

The witch had a silver tongue and could convince anyone to make a deal with her. It might not be compulsion magic, but it was very similar, and she used that power to influence people into signing contracts that greatly benefitted her and ruined them. She was a blight on this world that needed rectifying. And I was just the person to do it. But first, I needed her to cancel our contract, giving me back my birthright and my freedom.

We all went below deck. Alexa and the merc carrying the witch went left while I went right. I needed to get Leanne to look at both Solara and Mara and make sure they were healing properly. I could hear Mara's heavy breathing behind me—the elixir's effects wearing off. I glanced over my shoulder. She was leaning on Solara and looked about ready to pass out. Mara had made it through the market without requiring much help, but not in her usual smooth, graceful motion. She'd limped significantly the entire way. Now she could barely stand on her feet. Solara wasn't as bad, but her face showed signs of pain and strain. I ran back to them and signed to

Solara that I would help Mara, and that she needed to go get Leanne while I made our friend comfortable in her quarters.

Solara didn't complain as I took Mara's weight off her, just grunted her assent and staggered down the hall to get our healer. I pulled Mara's arm over my shoulder and could hear her hiss of pain I'm sure she tried to suppress.

"That cunt bastard deserved to be tortured for all the pain he caused, including mine," she gasped out. "Fucker didn't deserve a quick death." I didn't object. She was right, after all. He'd been a willing accomplice to all the witch's crimes. Luring unsuspecting men and women to the witch and allowing her to bind them to contracts that destroyed their lives under the guise of giving them what they asked for. Both were responsible for driving many of their victims to their deaths. Most of their victims had lost everything: their fortunes, their families, their friends. They fell into ruin, many times losing themselves in depravity or self-destructive behavior. They resorted to drugs, sexual exploitation and, in some extreme cases, suicide or murder. The witch had lived a very long life—some said she was over a thousand years old. If that were true, she was responsible for destroying millions of lives.

We finally reached our room, and I opened the door and helped Mara over to her bed. She sat down gingerly, groaning in pain the entire time. I quickly grabbed some clean rags from the washstand and placed them on the bed, then helped ease her down onto them. I looked at Mara's green eyes and signed that I needed to tear open her leggings so Leanne could get to work quickly.

"Okay, I'm ready." She gritted her teeth. I knew any movement of her legs would hurt, so I grabbed the torn edges of the cloth on her left leg and, as fast as I could, tore it completely open. Mara's pained groans filled the space in the room. I could hear footsteps rushing down the hallway and knew Leanne would arrive soon. I quickly moved to Mara's right leg and repeated the action. This time, Mara's response was a short shout that blended with the door banging open and Leanne entering the room.

“Let me take a look, Donyale.”

I stepped aside as she put her medical chest on the table next to Mara’s bed and got to work. I looked at Solara, who still held her injured arm across her chest, the belt holding. I signed to her and asked if Leanne would like me to help clean her up.

“Donyale wants to know if she can help clean the gash on my arm.” Her husky voice sounded tight with pain. Leanne looked up from examining Mara’s wounds. “Yes, grab the pink bottle in my chest first. Wash the wound with hot water, then apply the contents of the bottle onto the gash. It will remove any bacteria that might lead to infection.” She said all this while gently probing Mara’s legs, making sure there were no foreign particles stuck in there. Mara was breathing through her nose, face white with pain while trying to keep from shouting.

“You’ll heal just fine, Mara. You will be up walking the decks and terrorizing the crew in no time.” Leanne smiled, and I could see some of the tension drain from Mara’s face. The gashes were deep, but it looked like no lasting damage had been done. I sighed in relief and moved to Leanne’s chest, opening it and pulling out the pink bottle. I turned to Solara and signed for her to sit on one of the two stools in the room while I went to get enough hot water to cleanse both Mara’s and Solara’s injuries.

Cook glanced up when I stormed into the galley kitchen. I signed what I needed, and he jumped to grab a small steaming pot of boiling water. “Mind you, Captain, this is extremely hot and will burn your skin right off if you get it on you. I’d let it cool for a bit before using it. I was going to use it to prepare the sauce for the evening meal, but you need it more than the rest of us do right now.” He handed me the lidded pot. I grabbed the handles, which were covered in cloth to keep from burning my hands, and gingerly walked back to the room.

Leanne was leaning over her chest when I walked in. She glanced up, then looked at the pot I was carrying. She nodded her head in satisfaction. “I’ve given Mara a sedative that should take effect in a few minutes. I kept the tourniquets on

to stem the flow of blood but will need your help to stitch her legs back up. We'll need several layers of stitches. The gashes go pretty deep."

I nodded even though Leanne wasn't looking at me and placed the steaming pot by the wash basin, removing the lid to allow it to cool.

"I also looked at Solara's wound. It's also deep enough that we'll need to do the same stitching to close it up properly. That must have been some fight, Donyale, to do this to two seasoned warriors." She rose to her full height and turned toward me, making eye contact. As a healer she disapproved of violence, while I seemed to attract it no matter what I did. My philosophy was that, sometimes, you had to fight fire with fire. It just seemed like *sometimes* was almost *always* for me. She didn't drop her eyes, which was unusual for Leanne. It meant she was very upset about the outcome of our mission. I stared back at her unblinkingly, and when she continued the stare-off, I growled deep in my chest. I couldn't speak, but that didn't mean I couldn't make certain sounds.

Realizing she was treading on dangerous ground, she dropped her gaze. "I apologize, Donyale. I realize everyone knew what they were heading into, and it was their decision to volunteer to capture the witch. I just abhor violence," Leanne spoke as she checked Mara's vital signs. Making sure she was stable enough to do what was required to close her wounds and get her on the healing path. I went and stood by Solara, who looked up at me and winked. She knew I was dominant in every way. I didn't like to be challenged and reacted with aggression when people decided to push me. I hadn't always been that way. It had all changed after I turned sixteen and made an agreement that changed the course of my life. I signed the contract with the witch when I was sixteen, before I even knew the true depth of my powers. I knew something was different about me but didn't explore it because I thought I was going to lead a different life with Renault, the fucking cunt.

"The water should be ready to use now."



Leanne's voice startled me out of my musings. I took a few steps to the pot, grabbed several clean rags that were sitting on the shelf by the wash basin and dipped them into the hot water. It was still hot enough that it would be uncomfortable but not hot enough to burn. I turned and handed two of the cloths to Leanne. She took them gingerly and turned back to minister to Mara, who was out cold.

Solara sat quietly, waiting for me to begin. I put the rags down on the table next to her and asked if she also needed a sedative, then nodded my head toward Leanne, indicating that I wanted her to ask the healer.

"Will I also need a sedative, Leanne?" Solara's husky voice sounded loud in the room.

"Yes. I'll tend to Mara first and then stitch you up. I can give it to you now, but you'll need to lie down because it'll put you to sleep." She waved toward Mara's sleeping form. "Unless you think you can handle the cleaning without it."

"I think I can." Leanne nodded and glanced at me. I indicated that I understood, and picked up one of the rags and got to work. I worked as gently as possible, knowing that Solara must be in great pain. I cleaned the gash carefully and probed where the blood was scabbing over to make sure the area was clear of any dirt or debris from the fight. When I was done, the wound was trickling a little bit of fresh blood but was otherwise clear of any particles.

I glanced at Mara and Leanne. Mara was still in a deep sleep, pain etched into her features, while Leanne looked over at me and indicated she needed my help stitching Mara's left leg. I walked over and followed her instructions, holding the two sections of Mara's sliced thighs together so she could sew the muscles together, then the skin. I wasn't deterred by blood; in fact, I was fascinated by Leanne's profession and how she managed to put us back together with seamless effort.

After she was done, she stood up and stretched. "Solara should be ready to take the sedative." Leanne's voice was quiet but firm.

I turned back to Solara and asked if she wanted help lying down before taking the sedative. Pale-faced, she nodded, and we carefully got her onto her bed. I walked over to the chest and Leanne already had the sedative sitting next to the chest on the table.

“Have her drink what’s left in the bottle. I made sure to measure out the right dose for her weight.” She didn’t look up as she started working on cleaning Mara’s right leg.

I glanced at the left and was amazed once again at Leanne’s skill. Mara would probably only have a very thin scar from this fight. I grabbed the bottle, opened it and handed it to Solara, who had heard everything Leanne said. She tipped the bottle to her lips and drank its contents. I turned back to Leanne and helped her stitch up Mara’s right leg as well.

Once done, I washed my hands of all the blood and dragged a stool over to Solara’s bed. I sat in silence next to her while the drug took effect. I signed to her, asking if she needed anything else to make her comfortable.

“No, I’m good, Don. This is just a scratch. I’ll be up and about in no time, ready to take on the next bastard who decides to fuck with us.”

I grinned at that last part. Solara was fierce and ready to provide backup to any friend who needed it. We’d become fast friends after finding each other during combat training what seemed like eons ago. After we finally graduated, we left to find our fortunes, and that’s when we met Mara and Alexa. We were family now and would do anything for each other.

Her eyes began to droop after a few minutes, the sedative finally kicking in. I saw Leanne straighten from the corner of my eye and turned. She was stretching her back again. She was not of Fae origin—she was an elf. She was tall and slender with thick, wavy white-blond hair that reached the middle of her back. She was ethereal-looking, almost like a figurine that would break if you handled it the wrong way. But she was tough as fucking nails. She hated confrontation, but I had seen her fight, and she was extraordinary. She’d chosen to be a healer and avoid violence as much as possible. Something

had happened to her that made her choose this path, but she was very tight-lipped about it. When she'd joined my crew a few years ago, she had only given us her first name and said her family name didn't matter, only what she could do to keep my crew healthy.

Who was I to judge? I had my own secrets that only my closest friends knew about. All anyone knew of me was that I was an adventurous seafarer, seeking to make my fortune in our turbulent, monster-infested world. I knew some people thought me strange. Let them think that. They knew nothing about my past or what I needed to do to get my old life back.

I left Solara and Mara with Leanne and walked down to the holding cell where we kept the witch. It was time to reverse what she'd done.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Leaving the others, I walked down two levels and found Alexa and the mercs watching the witch, listening to her rant about her fate and the pain she would inflict on them once she was out of her prison cell. Her voice no longer had that sucking quality that compelled you to do her bidding; it now just sounded high-pitched and shrill. I mentally prepared myself for this confrontation and tried to leave my rage at the door. Looking at her now, you'd never have thought she had enchanted and lured some of the most powerful people in the world into giving up their most valuable possessions for a chance to live out their dreams. She always fucked you over, though. For me, she had taken a powerful gift: my voice. The very voice she used against others to take from them everything they were worth. Not only that, she'd managed to somehow exile me from my own kingdom, my family. I hadn't seen them in two hundred years.

Blinking, I focused on her now. Her green hair looked stringy and limp, her blue eyes were bloodshot and she had deep, dark bags underneath them. The skin on her face sagged, like she'd aged centuries in a day. I glanced at Alexa, but the very large merc standing next to her answered. Strange—he didn't look familiar.

“The iron nullifies her powers, the very powers she stole from those she tricked into signing those contracts. It also removes all glamour, so you see what she really looks like. I'm guessing she's at least a thousand years old, maybe older.” His voice was a deep baritone, soothing and warming me from the inside out.

I signed, asking for his name.

Alexa interpreted for me. “What is your name?”

“Lysander.” He looked directly at me when he said it. His eyes were a piercing midnight-blue, almost black, with silver flecks. He was one of the hottest male specimens I had ever seen. How hadn’t I noticed him before? His name was unique and quite intriguing.

I nodded my head in acknowledgement and signed to Alexa to share my name with him. “Her name is Donyale. She is the captain of this ship. She thanks you for the information.” I hadn’t, actually, but whatever. Alexa was always the diplomat when she interpreted what I said. I was direct and blunt about my thoughts, yet she always managed to make them sound politically correct. My mother would have loved her at court.

*I haven’t seen you before. How did you get on my ship?* I signed, and Alexa translated.

Her eyes lit up with fire at my question. She probably assumed he was one of the mercs we’d hired, but he didn’t look familiar to me at all.

“I just arrived. I received instructions from our mutual acquaintance that my mercs needed help. I came as soon as I could.” He stared me right in the eyes, daring me to question him further. I had lifted my hands to do just that when an unholy sound emanated from the iron cell. Forgetting the merc, I turned to face the vile creature in the same room as us.

I looked at her in the cell, panting in ragged breaths. Someone had thrown some clothes on her, covering her nakedness. She’d already torn her skin bloody trying to get out of the iron chains. I reached into my pocket and squatted down, bringing me to eye level with the witch. I pulled a pendant out of my pocket and dangled it in her face—the very one she had *gifted* me when we made our deal. She wore one just like it on her person. I could see the string peeking out around her neck. She suddenly became very calm and composed.

“Sweetheart, if you did all this to get out of the contract we made, you are in for a surprise. I cannot break the deal. It was done with both our consent, freely given. Once bound in blood, there is no going back.” Her raw voice scraped on my nerves. I just wanted to end her, and it infuriated me that I couldn’t.

I took a deep breath and signed to her, knowing she would understand. *I’ve read the contract and have consulted with the experts, and they assure me that there are several loopholes: The first is that we sign a new contract that returns my powers and my voice in exchange for something else. The second is to get your sister to break the contract with a new one of her own.*

At the mention of her sister, the witch straightened and growled. It was well known that she hated her sibling—a twin, if the stories were to be believed. She was even more powerful than this wretch and didn’t swindle people out of their livelihoods. This one before me was the black sheep of the family, not strong enough to be an advisor to kings and queens, and with the moral compass of a demon. She’d been shunned by her family when she made her first deal, ostracized and forced out of her homeland. All this I learned in my two hundred years of searching for her. I knew her whole history—and what she feared most was her sister.

“You little shit, do you really think she’d help you? If she heard you made a deal with me, she would turn her back on you, too. She thinks herself too high-class for the likes of you or me.” Her voice softened. “She’s also impossible to get to. She’s unattainable in her little ivory tower. Her king protects her like she’s the living embodiment of the gods. It’s sickening.”

I smiled as her voice betrayed her. She was so envious of her sister’s fortune and rank that she festered inside because of it.

“What the fuck are you smiling about? I won’t undo what we agreed to, and I know getting her to break the contract is a non-issue because she’ll never do it. She wouldn’t stoop to our level to do it. The high and mighty cunt will refuse.” Satisfied

that she had made her point, she leaned back against the wall and clamped her mouth shut.

I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out my secret weapon—a letter from her dear sister—and held it up for her to see, then placed it next to me on the ground, far enough away that she wouldn't be able to reach it.

*Did you really think I wouldn't do the legwork to understand my options? I figured you'd refuse—as if you had a choice in the matter. The challenge was in finding you, and it took too long, at that. I actually spoke with her in person after she answered my first letter requesting aid. You see, I am different. My family can be a great help to her king, so even if she found it distasteful to deal with this—with you—she would do anything to help the man she loves.*

“Fuck you!” Her scream bounced off the ship's walls. “It won't matter. What you don't know or haven't figured out is that this contract is more than just about you. Hidden deep in the language is a second binding. If the contract is voided by me or another, a race will begin—a fight for who will rule this realm. There are many dimensions and other worlds—and you, child, belong to two of them: this one, and the one that brought those monsters to our world.” Spit flew out of her mouth as she shouted these words.

Confused, I looked at Alexa, who looked just as lost as I did.

*What the fuck are you talking about? I was born in this realm to the Fae queen and her consort of the oceans. The granddaughter of Poseidon himself. Your attempt to keep me from breaking this contract is a fucking joke.*

“No, my dear. I see your slut of a mother failed to tell you that your father is *not* her consort, but a creature from another realm, one that wants to make our world his home and empire. Didn't you ever wonder why you look nothing like your sisters or so-called father? Your features are different, coloring is different, even your power is different. Everyone lied to you, Donyale. Everyone. If you break this contract or void it, it will signal the end of our world, because your darling father is evil

incarnate. He was behind our deal the entire time. He needed someone of his blood to open the door to his realm. His magic and power are different than ours, though in some ways similar. He is Fae, son of the gods, but not *our* gods. He will destroy us and everything in this world to remake it as he desires.” The witch spoke urgently. Fear made her voice tremble.

*There is no way my mother would betray my father that way. She loves him. And yes, I may look a little different, but I have been told that I resemble my grandfather more than my sisters. We share the same coloring and power.*

“Foolish child, believing what they tell you. I guess I would too, if I’d grown up as you have. Your real father glamoured himself to look like your mother’s consort. She had no idea at the time. The man you think is your father doesn’t know you aren’t his. He firmly believes you are his daughter. Your real father did his job so well that no one suspected he planted his seed deep in your mother’s womb. But she figured it out when you started showing signs of your powers and their depth. Your real father is just waiting for you to break this contract, for breaking it will rip open the fabric between our realms and he will come through with his horde of evil creatures and deadly armies to tear our world apart.” Desperation bled through her voice now.

My stomach clenched painfully, afraid that what she said was true. She had to be making all this shit up to keep me locked into this contract. Well, I’d had enough. *We sail out to meet your sister first thing in the morning. She will decide your fate once the contract is broken and all that you took from me is returned. I hope you rot in hell for everything you’ve done and put your victims through. I was lucky, but most weren’t. You speak of evil as if it is separate and apart from you, but it lives in you. You’ll finally get what you deserve, and I’ll have a front row seat to the show.* I gently picked up the letter, folded it back up and placed it back in my pocket next to my pendant. My rage was almost palpable at the lies she had just shared. It took everything in me to quiet my killing edge and rise to my full height, turning away from the snake who was once again trying to rip my world to pieces.



I turned to Alexa and Lysander. *Make sure she is watched at all times and only by people we trust implicitly. Gag her and keep her in shackles. I don't want any incidents occurring before we get to our destination.*

“As you say, Captain.” Alexa stood as she responded, searching my face in concern over what had been revealed to me today.

I ignored it, turned and walked back to the deck. I needed fresh air and the sight of the sea to clear my mind.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The ship's deck bustled with organized chaos. My crew working hard to make good time toward our destination. I took a deep breath, letting the salt air hit my lungs, soothing the anxiety I was feeling. I looked around: my entire crew, women all, operated as one like a well-oiled machine. I rarely had to take the helm these days. Everyone but Cook was a woman. Even then, I had to convince my crew that having a man on the ship wouldn't be bad luck. Cook was like us, an outcast, but his gift was in the culinary arts, and he enjoyed men just as much as we did. That had softened the rest's stance toward him a bit. It took a while for them to warm up to him, but he was one of us now and they'd do anything to protect him. Having the mercs on board, however, had proven to be quite a problem. I'd had to pay extra rations to keep my crew from finding other work when they learned we'd be transporting a team of male mercs with us to capture the witch. Things were still tenuous, but my crew loved sailing with me... I gave them purpose when they had none, and it didn't hurt that I'd made them rich in the process.

I closed my eyes and took a moment to center myself. My emotions from that confrontation were a mass of jumbled knots. I wanted to think clearly, and letting that bitch rile me wasn't going to help. Once I felt like I had my emotions under control, I opened my eyes and met Leanne's as she came up from below deck.

"Solara and Mara are sleeping off the sedative and will both recover from their injuries," she said as she joined me. "I'm sorry for my rudeness down there. I shouldn't have

challenged you that way. It was uncalled for. They chose this mission just as much as you did, as we all did. I'm just glad now that we're close to fulfilling what we set out to do." She turned away from me to look out across the horizon.

I lightly touched her arm to get her attention. Glancing at me in surprise, I smiled at her, letting her know that there were no hard feelings. Leanne could understand some sign language but wasn't fluent enough yet to catch what my smile could convey. She returned my smile, and we both shifted to watch the sunset in silence.

The hallway was dark when I went down below again. I headed to my office instead of our shared quarters, giving my friends time to heal without my tossing and turning. I knew it was going to be a restless night. What I'd heard today so disturbed me that it was still churning in my gut. I didn't want to believe what the witch had said. She was a known liar and manipulator who was desperate to escape. But some of what she said was true: I didn't look like my siblings or my parents. They were fair, where I wasn't. They had blue eyes, and I had hazel, almost gold-colored eyes. My mother and sisters were tall and willowy, and I was petite with curves.

I sensed motion ahead of me and snapped my head up. Lysander stepped forward. He paused next to my office door and gave me slow smile. "I figured you'd still be awake after what the witch said." His voice was soothing, and he looked sexy as hell. I stopped a foot away from him, breathing in his unique scent. It was like smelling lilacs and vanilla and it called to something deep inside me, stirring a longing I'd never felt before. I said nothing as he reached over and opened the cabin door to my office. I followed his movement with my eyes. Bold bastard, but it turned me on.

After everything that had happened today, I could blow off a little steam with some extracurricular activity. My gaze still on the open doorway, I turned and walked in, leaving it open in invitation. I heard the door shut softly and the latch engage. I stood in the center of the room, my desk on one side and a bed on the other. I sometimes worked late and slept in here so

as not to wake my friends. I also used it when I had company—the male kind.

I felt his hands on my shoulders and forgot everything else I'd had lined up that night. In short order, we had removed each other's clothing. Lysander was big and had a muscular warrior's body. I had expected a fit physique, but holy hell, he was built like a god. I traced the planes of his body first with my hands and then my mouth. He didn't rush me or become the aggressor, allowing me time to explore. I loved men, especially men that looked like Lysander: dark, tall, ripped... but I also liked them to dominate me sexually. I liked virile men who knew what they wanted and took it without hesitation.

I stepped back. He watched me with dark, predatory eyes, eerily still, as if he held himself back with disciplined control. It amped up my desire big time. His huge cock stood at attention, large and thick, waiting eagerly for my pussy or my mouth. I couldn't decide which would be best in the moment. I reached down and touched my large breasts, pinching my nipples, and then reached down with my right hand to touch my wet folds. I was dripping with need. I was ready to take him all in, and I wanted it now. I took the lead and dropped to my knees.

I grabbed his cock with one hand and licked the tip, hearing him suck in a breath followed by a deep rumble in his chest. I pumped my hand up and down a few times and then took him into my mouth. He was so wide that I was concerned I couldn't get him all in, but then he put his hand on my head, encouraging me to take more, and I felt a spike of desire so intense that I loosened my jaw further to accommodate. My head bobbed as I sucked on his cock, pumping my hand and cradling his balls at the same time. His groans of pleasure spurred me on. I was so wet that it was dripping down my thighs. I took my hand off his balls and tried to relieve the pressure in my pussy by massaging my clit, but quickly realized I needed his cock in me to get the pleasure I was looking for.

Still sucking him hard, hearing his groans and feeling his hand tighten on my hair, guiding me more aggressively up and down with slight pressure, made me groan and get even more wet, if that was possible. I pulled back and away, making a loud popping sound as his cock freed itself from my mouth. I looked up at his face. He appeared almost feral in his intensity. It was fucking hot. He pulled me up roughly, sending a spike of heat through me. He turned me around and, as he guided me to the bed, his hands explored everywhere. He pinched my nipples, making me drop my head back against his chest in wanton delight. His left hand then went straight to my wet core, dipping his fingers into the wetness, while his tongue traced along my neck, leaving a trail of intense sensation that further tightened my core.

I bumped into the bed and he didn't lay me down gently—no, he was done letting me lead. He bent me over, my ass in the air, and then bent to lick the inside of my thighs slowly. I was impatient and tried to grab his cock to show him what I wanted, but he held me firmly with one hand on each ass cheek and dug his glorious tongue right into my heat. If I could shout, I would have. Instead, I arched my back and groaned. The feel of his tongue right where I needed it was divine. I felt the roughness of it against my liquid heat, spearing me and licking me relentlessly. He then moved to my clit and sucked hard, blasting me into an orgasm that gushed more wetness into his waiting mouth, and he sucked it all in as if it was ambrosia, which only turned me on even more.

After licking me for what seemed like a lifetime, I felt the blunt tip of his cock at my entrance. My excitement spiked—I hadn't had a man fuck me hard in months, and I needed the release this would give me. He eased in an inch and stopped. I wriggled my ass, letting him know I wanted it all and was losing patience. Licking and sucking my pussy was great and all, but I needed his cock now. He chuckled, but held me firm, making me wait for it. He inched in slowly, breathing heavily from the restraint he was exerting. I felt every single inch as he moved inside of me. He was large and stretched me to the limit, but my pussy loved it, the greedy bitch.

He finally seated his cock all the way in and I was gloriously stretched and full. He didn't move for a second or two, giving us both time to adjust. He had one hand on my right ass cheek and the other on the middle of my back, holding me in place. He then quickly pulled out and slammed back into me, sending wonderful spears of pleasure throughout my body. He didn't stop there: he kept up a rhythm of hard thrusts, pulling out and in so fast that the sounds of our bodies slapping together was the only thing that could be heard in the room. He then reached over and grabbed a fistful of my hair and pulled my head back—almost painfully, but not quite. This took me to a whole other level of desire. I could feel the friction between his cock and my pussy as he rammed into me, but when he pulled on my hair, I skyrocketed into another orgasm more intense than the last. He never slowed down, letting me ride the orgasm until I saw stars dancing behind my eyelids.

He pulled out, flipped me over and placed my legs over his shoulders. My core tightened as he rammed in, driving another groan out of me. He hit just the right spot at this angle, driving me into another set of sensations that tore through my body like electricity. I was chasing my next one when he changed the angle slightly, going even deeper than before at a faster pace. The sensitive male I'd initially encountered was gone. This one was not asking for permission, but taking what he wanted and giving me everything I asked for in return.

I looked up and saw utter desire and deep concentration on his face. Not allowing me time to breath as he pumped in and out at a pace I couldn't believe he could maintain without coming. He looked fierce and hot as fuck. The sound of our skin connecting sent me closer to my next orgasm, and then he did something that pushed me over the edge: looking into my eyes, he reached over with his left hand and pinched my clit, putting just the right amount of pressure on it. That made me come so hard that I almost lost consciousness...almost. Dark spots danced before my eyes as the rush of pleasure tore through my body, and then I felt him speed up even more, sending me even higher while he chased his release.

He came with a loud moan as I reached the peak of mine. There was a connection that I had never felt deep in my sternum, followed by a feeling like rays of sunshine, warming my skin and spreading throughout my languid body. With his cock rooted deep inside me, still hard as stone yet seated comfortably, I closed my eyes again and moved my legs down his body to rest on the bed. Large hands massaged my sensitive breasts and then I felt his tongue there, licking and sucking my left nipple, shooting tingling sensations directly to my core, like small orgasms, prolonging the feeling. Putting my hand on his head, I held him there, encouraging him to continue his attention to my left breast while his left hand pinched and rolled the nipple on my right breast—this was what I needed in order to forget—and then he started moving again. He wasn't done...

This time it was slow heading out and hard coming back in. My pussy eagerly took him in—the wanton bitch loved this action. His mouth didn't stop the attention it was giving my left breast, sucking my nipple hard in time to his hips slamming into me. Heat infused my core, ready for another round of fucking. He couldn't be human because his stamina was beyond what the human body could handle. But what the hell did I care. I needed an escape, and he was giving it to me.

Closing my eyes, I felt him deep inside as he switched his mouth to my right breast and his right hand found my left breast. My hands were everywhere: his head, to keep him attentive to my breasts; his back, to dig my nails in, showing him that I wanted it hard and fast. I gripped his hips, desperately wanting more as he thrust into my core repeatedly. I was so hungry for more, and he didn't disappoint. Our mingled juices were all over my thighs and I could feel his balls slapping my ass wetly, bathing us both in our fluids. That only made me want to go harder. I pulled his hair back and pushed against him, letting him know what I wanted.

He eased back on his knees, and I shoved him onto his back. It was my turn to take the lead. He gave me a rakish grin, making him look dark and sinister and so fuckable that I eagerly grabbed his thick cock and placed it at my entrance as I straddled him. I didn't wait, but impaled myself on him,

delicious friction bursting through me, lighting me up from the inside. Grabbing my hips, he dug his fingers into my skin, telling me how to move. He lifted me up slightly, but I slapped his hands away. This was my ride, and I would manage the rhythm.

He let go and moved again to my breasts, tweaking the nipples in a way that sent a shiver of pleasure-pain through me. I bounced, mimicking my first move over and over again. Riding him hard, feeling him deep inside me only to be removed and the action repeated. I was experiencing pure ecstasy, chasing my next orgasm. He leaned up then and took my left nipple in his mouth and bit down. I exploded in the most powerful release I'd ever had. The feeling rushed through my body, hitting every nerve ending and sending a rush of wetness down my pussy. I let go of the reins because I could barely think, much less move at the pace he wanted. He sat up and lifted me like I weighed a feather, up and down, up and down, up and down—not gentle at all—and he kept me entirely focused on what his cock was doing to me, giving me. He pulled me off him and reversed my position, placing my legs on either side so that I'd ride while facing away from him. I'd never done this one before but was willing to try it.

I was impaled a second time, forcing a moan of pleasure out of me. This position hit a very different spot that took me to a new level of pleasure. Lifting me up and down, he showed me what I needed to do, and I took over. I grabbed onto his knees, leaned forward a little and got into my rhythm. Shit, the feel of him in this position was something else entirely, his cock hitting that special spot more directly. I moved faster, hearing him hoarsely groan behind me, and then I felt it: his finger at the entrance of my ass.

I paused slightly, not sure whether I liked it, but he kept rocking up against me—and it felt so good, so much pleasure rocking through me—that I kept going. What the hell, I was an adventurer; I'd try it and see where it led. I focused on riding his cock hard, my pussy banging his cock as if our lives depended on it. His thumb penetrated my ass and I lost it again. This orgasm was just as good as the last, making me come long and hard, until I thought this was it, I was going to



die from having my brains fucked out. While lost in the moment, he kept up the pace and pushed even further into my ass, making the orgasmic tingles running through my body sharper, more intense. He somehow moved so that he never unseated himself—then he was behind me again, pumping away, finger back in my ass along with a slap on it for good measure. I was spent, but the aftereffects of my orgasms kept tingles of sensation running rampant throughout my body. He seated himself deeply one final time before shouting in release, making me come again in tandem. My arms couldn't hold me up after all that. I collapsed with him on top of me, cradling me as he moved to lay on my right.

Both breathless and trying to regain our senses, we lay there motionless. He then shifted and crawled over me to get to the washstand at the foot of the bed. He took a clean rag and poured water into the bowl from the pitcher next to it. Wetting the rag thoroughly, he came back and wiped away the evidence from my inner thighs. He was gentle, but the cloth exacerbated the tingling nerves in my core, making them extremely sensitive. All I could do was close my eyes and let him clean me up.

Once done, he walked back and proceeded to clean himself. After placing the now-dirty rags in the laundry bin, he walked back and picked up his clothes and began to dress. I watched the play of his muscles as he put on his pants, and the ripple of his abdomen as he pulled his shirt over his head, wondering again at how beautiful he was. He had to have some Fae in his family tree. Humans were attractive and could reach Fae-like beauty, but he was beyond that. Intrigued, I sat up and walked over to my desk, my nudity not bothering me in the least. I grabbed parchment from the left drawer and my pen from the right.

I wrote on the page, *Who are you?*

Striding over, he looked at what I wrote. “You know this already. I am Lysander, a merc.”

Shaking my head, I wrote instead, *Are you Fae?*

There was a long pause as if he was trying to make up his mind about what to tell me. “Is that important?”

He looked guarded and I understood what it was like to have secrets, so I left it alone. I shook my head and walked back to my bed. I stripped it, placed the dirty sheets in the laundry bin and walked over to the basket on the other side of the bed to grab a new set. I made the bed while he watched me quietly finish dressing. There was no offer to help and I didn't expect any. When I was done, I turned to face him. He was fully clothed again. It was as if the last hour of sex had never happened. I walked up to him and placed my hand on his chest. There was something nagging me, just sitting in the back of my mind. But it was elusive and I had more interesting things to think about, like the male specimen in front of me. Yet, he remained perfectly still, not returning my contact. I thought that odd, but maybe he was one of those who didn't like to linger after fucking. I could understand that.

I tiptoed up as far as I could to place a soft kiss on the corner of his mouth, and he leaned down a bit to accommodate my height. It was my way of thanking him for giving me what I needed: an outlet to relieve my tension and worry. I turned and walked back toward the bed and heard the door click closed. Crawling under the covers in the buff, I quickly fell into a dreamless sleep.

## CHAPTER SIX

Captain!”

The shout woke me up from a deep sleep. A banging sound brought me fully awake and alert. I ran to the door and pulled it open. Leila stood on the other side, not shocked at seeing me in all my naked glory. “We have a problem: a sea serpent has been spotted and it is headed straight for us,” she said with a calm that belied our situation.

*Get Alexa up and have her meet me on deck. Solara and Mara are to remain in their cabin, Captain’s orders,* I signed quickly, then rushed back into the room to grab a clean pair of clothes. Dressing as fast as possible, I ran down the hallway and up to the deck. The early dawn sky was overcast but the waters were relatively calm. We had made good time overnight and were about halfway to our destination, but that wouldn’t matter if we couldn’t outrace the beast.

Alexa reached me and I signed what I wanted. For as long as we’d been together, we’d worked as a team. She was my second in command, and normally we’d use the deck’s lighting system to help us see in the gloom, but we didn’t have time for that now. It took at least ten minutes to get the power generator running. I hadn’t thought to power it up last night, being too preoccupied with Solara and Mara’s injuries, what the fucking witch revealed and the extracurricular activities with Lysander. Frustration and disappointment speared through me, but I set it aside. I needed a clear head for this.

Alexa nodded and began shouting orders. The crew moved in organized chaos, bringing down the sails so I could call on

air to try and get us out of range. Even though it may take more time than we had to power it up, she still sent a sailor to turn on the lights. Having the system up and running would make it easier for everyone to focus on their tasks.

“Did you have some fun last night?” Her small smile told me she knew what I’d been up to. I didn’t respond. “You know we could hear you two loud and clear... The bed creaking and banging against the wall had us ready to fuck the next male we laid eyes on. Unfortunately for me, that was Cook.” She made a gagging face which made me laugh out loud, although no sound left my mouth. I shook my head and walked to my perch. A sailor handed me the scope so I could spot this predator that was hunting us. I scanned the horizon and then I saw it. Its undulating form making waves that erupted away from it. From this distance, it didn’t look like much, but that was deceiving.

I quickly calculated its speed and size. This fucker was huge and moving at a speed that would overtake us in less than twenty minutes, if we didn’t move. I handed the scope to Alexa and stepped down from my perch. I scanned the deck, and all the sails were unfurled and ready. As Alexa joined me, I gave her the signal.

“Brace yourselves, Captain’s ready!” The crew knew what we were doing; we’d done it so many times in the past to outrun these beasts that came from nowhere. Closing my eyes, I focused on the bright flare of power deep inside me and coaxed it out. Blasting too much air too fast could tear the sails, so I had to build up to it. I felt a strong breeze answer my call and built it further. The clouds in the sky darkened. My power pushed against me, wanting to go balls-to-the-wall crazy, but I gritted my teeth and kept my increase in power measured. I was responsible for my crew’s lives, and I wouldn’t do anything to endanger them.

Alexa stood firmly next to me, making sure I was protected. She was also tracking the beast and would make sure I knew if it was getting too close. I could hear the snap of the sails and started pushing harder. The air curled around me,

caressing me, and beyond me I heard my crew hanging on for dear life.

Then there was a loud gasp and I paused my push of air. “Fuck me, it just *jumped*. Don, we need to push the ship harder—this thing isn’t just swimming, it’s using some power to jump distances.”

I resumed using my power and redoubled my efforts. What at first sounded like a whisper became a shout as the air I pushed turned into a gale-force wind. Soon the ship was moving as fast as possible, but I had to try and push it some more. I channeled more energy and commanded the air to lift the ship. Maybe if we could fly we could outrun this thing.

The ship jerked as it was lifted. I heard loud cries from my crew. This had never been done before; for as long as we’d sailed, we’d always stuck to the water. My crew were a superstitious lot, so I hoped they’d trust me to get us out of this. There were other voices, male voices now speaking with Alexa. I could hear Lysander’s deep baritone and my body reacted with heat going straight to my core. *This is not what I needed right now*. Focusing all I had to keep the ship in the air, I ignored my body and his presence.

The concentration it took to keep us airborne was tremendous. Sweat dripped down my face. I was depleting my energy much faster than normal. I then felt a secondary energy join mine. Surprised, I opened my eyes and saw Lysander directly in front of me, his eyes on the sky—I could feel our energies mixing, keeping the ship stable while moving through the air.

“Incoming!” Alexa’s voice punched through my musings as a loud roar surrounded us. I looked in the direction the beast had last been, shocked that it was already upon us. We weren’t high enough to avoid a direct strike from the monster, and sure enough, one of its yellow eyes emerged over the side of the deck, its maw following quickly afterward, ready to take a bite out of our ship. Lysander stopped pushing the vessel with his energy, and I felt the weight of it as I kept us in the air without his power. He shifted his attention to the beast.

“Sailors, battle stations!” Alexa’s scream cut through the air and the crew flew into motion. The sounds were a cacophony of mayhem: shouts coming from various points on the ship, the creature roaring its fury, Alexa directing our sailors into battle with the monstrous thing. My one job was to keep us in the air and moving. If I failed, we would be at this beast’s mercy. I spared one glance at Lysander, and he was squared off with the sea serpent, hands in the air, spears of water rising behind the creature. Another round of confusion went through me. How was he using two elements?

Alexa appeared in my line of sight just as Lysander let loose whatever power he was building; the water rose even higher behind the beast and then what looked like hands enveloped it, pulling it away from the ship. The serpent screamed its rage and thrashed, forcing threads of water to break—it was too strong—but then it disappeared. The massive sea monster just vanished. Everything went deadly still and silent.

And then we heard it, like an intake of breath just before diving deep into the ocean. The beast appeared on the opposite side and aimed for the mainmast, trying to bring the ship down into the water. My energy pulsed as the beast whipped its head toward the mast, intending to snap it like a twig. My crew fired everything we had at it, trying to distract it to give us a chance to fly past.

In a last-ditch effort to break free, I shifted the air so that our ship flipped vertical, our sails pointing in the direction of the horizon. The beast missed, and we popped back up. That little move would keep the beast at bay a little longer. It had taken all my reserves, but I had managed it; my crew had been smart enough to grab hold of something before they tumbled off the side and into the water. Somehow, Lysander kept his footing and continued to work fast beside me; he created a trident out of water and threw it at the beast’s eye. Except the fucking thing bounced off! What the fuck was this thing? I’d never encountered a creature with a protective shield. In the back of my mind, panic took hold. I couldn’t let my crew die this way. We needed to find a way to weaken whatever was protecting this thing.

Lysander cursed loudly, then started to strip down. What was this now? He must be out of his mind. Was he getting ready to jump ship? My crew jumped back into action, fighting for all they were worth. Nothing seemed to work though as the bowsprit bounced off the beast's scaled hide.

Was the shield magical? I used my mind's eye to see its aura, and sure as shit, a thin layer of magic protected the creature, preventing any weapons from harming it. It looked like a dark layer of skin overlaid across its scales. Maybe slicing it with the bowsprit could weaken it? I manipulated the air to turn the ship as rapidly as possible. I could hear the ship groan in response; it couldn't continue to take this kind of maneuvering. Then I felt a loud crash, startling me so much that I released some of my hold on my element.

Turning, I saw the beast's tail wrapped around the stern of the ship. Motherfucker was going to tear us apart. A large surge of energy blasted through the air, knocking me down, and the ship started falling, whipped around by the serpent's tail. Grabbing whatever reserves I had left, I pushed air underneath the ship, slowing our fall significantly enough that we wouldn't break apart on impact.

A second roar filled the air and my heart stopped. Was there *another one*? I jumped up and kept a tight hold of my element, making sure we wouldn't die from the immediate catastrophe at hand while trying to avert another one. Feeling like I had a good grip on our ship, I dared to glance around. I looked up and couldn't believe my eyes: where I thought there might be two serpents, there was only one, but what astounded me was the second creature that roared so loud my ship trembled.

A dragon.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

It was of the deepest cobalt blue with brilliant streaks of silver throughout, and nearly a hundred feet long with a wingspan of about eighty-five feet. It was basically the size of the fucking serpent, but airborne.

The serpent was no longer paying attention to us; it was focused on this new threat. Its head was hovering about twenty feet above the water, its body undulating behind it. Its razor-sharp teeth were on display as it opened its mouth and roared at the dragon, which flew above it, just out of range. Then the water around the serpent's body started churning, as if something else was beneath the surface. The dragon beat its wings but remained in place, hovering over the serpent; then it screamed so loud that everyone on the ship ducked and covered their ears. It was a battle cry.

It dove right at the serpent, who couldn't seem to move away. It thrashed, trying to defend itself or flee, but it was locked in place. The dragon and serpent clashed in a flurry of teeth, water, blood and bone. The crash reverberated and rocked the ship. I needed to get us away from the fighting beasts or we'd end up in Davy Jones' Locker ourselves. My power was severely depleted.

Alexa made her way to me. "We need to get out of here, Don. What do you need?" I grabbed her hand, knowing she'd understand.

Taking a deep, deep breath, I pulled on Alexa's energy. She gladly opened herself up and gave me everything I needed to get us away from the battle raging around us. Her power



glowed a bright orange-red, like the sunset on a clear night, and pulsed with infinite energy. Reaching out, I asked for help, and it came to me. I took only as much as I needed to pull the air close around the ship and get it moving away from the two creatures tearing at each other.

Once again, I called on air and we moved east toward our destination, far enough away from the bloodbath between the dragon and the serpent that we wouldn't be collateral damage. Exhausted, I slumped down on the deck floor, Alexa still holding my hand. Looking at her, you'd think she had been in a bar fight. She was bleeding from cuts on her face, and her hands looked even worse.

She must have seen the concern in my eyes because she sighed and said, "I'm alright, they're just scratches. Nothing that won't heal in a few hours. You should look in the mirror. That show of power took so much of your strength that you look like you've lost about twenty pounds. You should have pulled on the crew's energy, not just your own. You'll kill yourself one day trying to do it all by yourself."

She didn't know what it would cost me to take from others what was not freely given. It was in my ship's contract that doing so would only create a bigger chasm for me to climb out of. Alexa had encouraged me to make it part of the deal the crew signed to sail with me and I'd eventually agreed, but still, it would cost me more than I was willing to give.

Shaking my head "no," I wobbled as I got to my feet with her help and looked around. We would need to stop and make repairs at the next port. We'd limp along well enough, I guess. Glancing quickly at the crew, it didn't look like we'd lost anyone, though I wouldn't be sure until we were out of this free and clear and I could take stock.

Hearing a shrill scream, I turned back to look at what was happening between the two fighting creatures. We were far enough away that it was hard to make out what had emitted the scream, but then we saw the dragon rear up with the serpent in its claws and its face buried in the creature's throat. The serpent suddenly went limp, and the dragon lifted its head

and roared its victory. Letting go of the dead sea monster, it flapped its wings to gain altitude and headed in our direction.

Fuck. We needed to move! Grabbing Alexa's hand again, I braced myself to take more of her power, but then felt her grab my wrist with her other hand. Turning to her, I found her shaking her head in dissent. My forehead crinkled in confusion. Why would she stop me?

"Don, no. We don't need to fear the dragon. It's Lysander."

My head whipped back in the direction of the dragon and then back to her face again. *What do you mean, it's Lysander. Lysander the merc? Is this some fucking joke? Dragons haven't left their lands in eons. Why would we have one here disguised as a merc?* Feeling like a damn fool, my anger spiked. He played me this whole time? Motherfucker!

"Yes, the same Lysander that helped us secure the witch is an actual dragon, and he just saved our asses." She gave me knowing look. She knew I didn't fuck shifters for a reason. And this one had lied to me, tricked me. I could hear him getting closer to the ship. My anger kept me on my feet as I waited for him to arrive.

His massive wingspan blew our sails full, pushing us along farther east, but then a pillar of water rose to meet him, and another burst of energy followed. The pillar came down by the stern of the ship, where he climbed over the rails and stood naked, his human body dripping water and bloody gashes covering parts of his naked body—but I saw none of that. My focus was on his eyes. I wanted to see if he'd meant to betray me.

He looked guarded, but there was no remorse in his eyes. That only spurred my anger further, and I marched past him to go below deck. I needed to check on my friends and my prisoner. His eyes followed me, not giving anything away. He was as naked as the day he was born; I saw how my presence affected him, and heat filled my core. I was having none of that shit. This asshole had lied to me, had amazing sex with me and then proceeded to look at me without an ounce of guilt. He could go fuck himself.

Sliding down the ladder, I checked on Solara and Mara first. I found Leanne in their room, checking their bandages. Solara and Mara were out cold.

She looked up as I entered and set her mouth in a grim line. “You need to find another way to pull energy to use your element, Donyale. This isn’t healthy. Too much too often will kill you.” She got up and went to her medicine chest. “Here, drink this.” She handed me a vial of dark-blue liquid.

I knew it would restore what I had used, but hesitated because the stuff was addictive.

“They are doing well,” Leanne said. “When I heard the alarm, I came in here and strapped them down, and myself. Their injuries are still healing as expected. You need some rest after you drink that elixir. It will take at least twenty-four hours for you to feel like yourself again.” She gave me a pointed look, and I nodded my acknowledgement of her doctor’s orders.

“Don, what the hell happened up there?” Solara’s husky voice sounded to my right. She was alert, but I could see she was in pain.

*We ran into a sea serpent and had a hell of a battle, but we’re in the clear now,* I signed to her.

“Hell of a time to be bedridden. I didn’t appreciate you ordering us to stay here. I could have helped.” Her voice was a little louder than before.

Leanne’s voice cut in. “Solara, you would have been a liability up there and you know it.”

*I appreciate you wanting to help, but we had it covered,* I signed to her. Leanne moved back to her medicine chest, and I took the opportunity to glance at Mara.

“She’s still sedated,” Leanne’s voice cut through the room. “Her injuries are worse than Solara’s, and she’s in a lot of pain. Even with her abilities, it will take her at least a week to fully heal. She probably didn’t feel or hear any of the battle that took place above deck. And I’m thankful, too. Mara would have tried to go against your orders if she thought

Alexa or you were in danger.” Shaking her head, she closed her medicine chest and went to wash her hands. “Now take your medicine.”

I stared down at the vial she had handed me moments ago, hesitating.

“You rarely consume those,” Leanne said, “so you’ll be fine.”

Glancing again at Solara and Mara, I opened the stopper and downed the contents. It raced through my body and catapulted me into such a euphoric state that I braced my hand on the wall to keep me steady.

“I’ll finish up here, then head up to do what I can for any crew members that may have been injured. I’ll give you a full report after I’m done,” Leanne said as I turned to walk out of the room.

Before going to my office, I went down to the belly of the ship, where we had the witch stowed away. Two mercs were there, both watching her intently to make sure she wasn’t pulling any tricks. This time I checked them out more fully; I sniffed the air to see if there was any hint that they were shifters. They looked at me as I entered and didn’t react to my scenting the air. That told me enough. They were large, but not as large as Lysander. I had also observed that they deferred to him whenever they were around him. So, it was likely that they were also shifters. Wasn’t this some shit.

The witch was still gagged but was making sounds like she had something to say. I gestured to the mercs to take her gag off.

Her shrill voice filled the room. “I *told* you that your father needs you to break the contract to open the portal fully. Whatever you were fighting out there was likely sent by him.” Her face looked up at the single port window in the room, away from the mercs and me.

Thinking she was done, I motioned for them to gag her again. But it was too good to be true.

“Why do you think I avoided you for so long? I didn’t fear you, nor did I need to maintain the contract, for I already had what I wanted from you: your voice. You see, I was supposed to kill you right after you signed the contract. Your father wanted you dead to further his own ends. If you died, the contract would be void and the portal would be blown wide open. I avoided you to keep you alive, you stupid twit. And now you’ll set in motion the very thing your father wants: a way for him to come through to our world and make it his. By signing the contract, you cracked the portal open, but not fully. His creatures come through to prepare the world for his coming.” She stared daggers at me. Her dull blue eyes piercing the dimness in the room, almost glowing.

“That won’t happen.”

Startled, I glanced behind me. Lysander stood at the door, fully dressed, watching me carefully. “It can’t happen. The contract cannot be broken. We need to find a way to seal the portal and then find a way to release you from the contract.” His voice was soothing, but the words he spewed did the opposite.

Not daring to sign anything for fear I’d tip my hand, I kept my face neutral and raised one eyebrow as I stared into his eyes. Facing off with him, I looked him up and down before walking confidently out of the room. This was getting too complicated, and I didn’t know what to believe anymore, but I’d be damned if I showed him any of that.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

We arrived at port with no further incident, thank the gods. We were barely seaworthy and needed a fortune in repairs. The fucking serpent had done a number on my baby. It just so happened I had amassed a great fortune, and now I was going to have to dip into it to make sure my ship was as good as new. Solara and Mara were fully healed now and back to their normal selves: sassy and mean. A great combination if you liked that sort of shit.

Lysander had tried to speak to me a few more times during this last week of sailing. I didn't give him the opportunity. My friends did a wonderful job at blocking all his attempts, just one more reason to love those bitches for all eternity. He had been found out, and I didn't want anything to do with him or his shifter crew. I had already slipped once, and anything further would create more problems than I cared to deal with at the moment.

The morning we pulled into the port city of Dyleria, the girls and I dressed quickly, first thing, and waited for our crew on deck. We made it a habit to reward the crew with bonuses for their contributions on the trip. This one had been rough. We had five crew members that had been severely injured, but they survived. Another ten had minor injuries and were able to get back to work in a day or so. Leanne had managed to get everyone back on their feet—with the exception of Solara and Mara—within forty-eight hours. That in itself was a huge feat. Some of the injuries looked pretty bad, but Leanne had some crazy healing abilities that sped things up dramatically.

We were ready when our crew started streaming out of their quarters, ready to have a good time in the city. We handed each one a purse full of gold coins and let them know that we were setting sail in a week's time, after repairs had been made. They were all smiles and excitement. I loved being the kind of captain that my sailors loved to work with, even through monster-infested waters.

We were all smiling and laughing, happy that our crew were excited about coming ashore to have some much-needed R&R, when fuckface decided to show up on deck. I sobered immediately, my smile transforming into a scowl. My friends turned to see what had soured my mood and quickly shifted to close ranks on him. I loved their fierce protectiveness of me, but I didn't need it this time. I wouldn't let him cause any more damage than had already been done. I stepped forward in line with my friends and they made room for me.

I stood there in raging silence as he approached. He didn't seem impressed with our show of solidarity. He was still otherworldly gorgeous, which made sense now. Alexa had found several pendants in the quarters assigned to him and his pals. Apparently, we had been duped when we requested aid from the mercenary group we hired from. These guys weren't mercs, but dragon shifters. The amulets were spelled to make them look less intimidating and mask their scent. We were all duped.

As if in unison, my friends all took a big whiff of their aroma—it smelled like heaven to me, especially Lysander. The others smelled nice, I guess, but his scent called to me, bringing about a yearning I'd never felt before. I smothered it immediately. I couldn't let any soft emotion cloud my judgement. All I knew of this guy was his duplicitous nature, and that was all I needed to know.

Midnight-blue eyes that glowed beautifully and burned with an emotion I couldn't name were glued to my face, but I forced myself to show no emotion and stared right back. He growled, a sound so low I could barely hear it, but it vibrated through my body, molten heat spreading through my lower

body. Not liking the feel of this, I stepped back and turned, walking away from him.

“Afraid to speak to me, Donyale? I figured after a week that you’d have at least come to your senses and let me explain.” It sounded like he had to force the words out of his mouth. So, he was angry, huh? Good, let him be angry. I was done. I needed to get to the meeting point with Giselle, the witch’s sister. It was time to take back what was mine.

I felt my friends turn to follow me when there was a sudden energy pulse in the air, coming from Lysander. My body responded in a way that I had never felt.

A tremendous eddy of power slammed into me—a cord of energy latched onto my own, my power fusing with it. The pressure was insane. I could hear my friends yelling at Lysander and using their elemental abilities to get him to release me. But all I felt was immense pain and joy, such that I didn’t know if I could live without it. My eyes were closed, and yet I saw the most beautiful image: four points, connected to me, all of them different hues—cobalt blue, bright white, forest green and brilliant crimson—weaving together to form one intricate design that moved off into different, smaller branches, creating and evolving into new shapes. In the center was what looked like a sun, golden rays pulsating to a heartbeat.

It was unlike anything I’d ever felt before. I was abruptly released, and I fell back onto my ass. Tears streamed down my face, and I touched my cheeks to make sure they were mine. I didn’t remember crying.

Disoriented, I looked around me and noticed my friends had surrounded the males on the ship and were using their elemental powers against them. Blasts of heat followed by stone and water were bombarding a shield that looked like it was made of blue fire. In the center of the shield was Lysander, standing tall and straight. The barrier protecting him sizzled as it encountered the other elements being thrown at it.

Lysander. His gaze was still on me. Eyes glowing a bright cobalt-blue. I realized then what I had felt. I had read about it



and spoken to many shifters about it: the true mate bond. But how was that possible?

The two shifters with Lysander suddenly adjusted their positions, facing east and west, and stood with their heads bent and arms out as if in offering, and the shield responded, hitting each of my friends with enough power to toss them overboard, effectively cutting me off from any help. I jumped up, gathering my power and calling air, only to stop because Lysander was suddenly upon me. Moving at a speed I couldn't track; he grabbed my arms in a tight enough grip that I lost concentration due to the physical contact.

In that one moment, everything changed.

## CHAPTER NINE

He held me steady, but his grip wasn't easing up, especially when he lifted me off the ground. Panicking that he was getting ready to bind me, I switched to physical attack, kicking his shins as hard as I could. That worked out about as well as a toddler kicking a stone giant. I could see his jaw clench, probably because he wanted to throw me overboard, too. Gods, he looked so good—despite myself, I wanted to melt against him and rub myself all over him. The heat emanating from my core made me moan. Lord help me, that was counterproductive to escaping his clutches. I must have somehow lost my sanity when he shocked me with that energy.

His jaw clenched tight, and his lips barely moved as he said, “Listen, Donyale, I am not here to hurt you. I was sent to help you recover the witch and find a way to close that fucking portal. I didn't intend for things to transpire the way they did. And for that, I am sorry. But nothing changes with my mission. We are running out of time, and I cannot let you give the witch to Giselle. You don't need to understand, but I do need you to comply. I must take her to my people. She has valuable information that can help us find a way to release you from the contract and close the portal.” His voice was controlled, yet I could hear the urgency lacing his words. He smelled like paradise, making me angry from having to constantly refocus on my goals. He was doing something to me every time he looked at me or touched me.

I needed to get control of this situation. Remembering his words, I growled in response. Why the fuck would I let him

take her when I'd spent centuries looking for the hag? He must be out of his damn mind. No fucking way. I softened my face and loosened my body as if in acquiescence, and he loosened his hold, thinking he had convinced me. Dumbass.

I'd only ever done this once, and it took an unbelievable amount of power to expend, but I needed to get them off this ship and away from us. I went deep into my power and speared him in the solar plexus with a power blast of air, breaking all his ribs and then some. We flew apart. Surprise lit his features as he went airborne and landed with a loud boom; I, on the other hand, landed nimbly, having known what my power would do. Except he was a dragon shifter, so that wouldn't keep him down for long, and his friends were about to blast me to smithereens.

Exhausted, I turned to face them when my three friends landed by me, soaking wet, and quickly threw out a barrage of firepower so intense that the males couldn't respond. I ran over to where Lysander lay unconscious to check on him while my friends took care of his men. I didn't want him dead, just out of commission.

He was out cold and looked pretty banged up. I winced at the gashes that must surely be underneath his clothes as blood leaked through. *Now, how do we keep them out of our way?* My mind sifted through various options, but we knew so little of dragon shifters that I couldn't be sure anything would work. I only knew of one thing that could keep them disabled and that was iron, but we had used all we had on the witch to keep her on ice for now. I couldn't spare any more for this prick or his friends. Thinking fast, I figured we could run down the street to Mick's shop and see if he had something we could use. I turned to Alexa and, as if she knew I needed her, she glanced my way midbattle. I signed what I needed, and she nodded. She spoke to the other two quickly and took off running to Mick's.

Worried that Lysander would wake before she arrived, I stayed right by him and was ready for another power strike. Dragons were extremely hard to kill, almost impossible. Taking Lysander by surprise was what had saved me the first

time; I couldn't let him get his bearings a second time. The noise of combat stopped suddenly. I whipped my head toward my friends, making sure they were okay. They had the dragons surrounded. I wasn't sure why they hadn't shifted, but I suspected they were supposed to stay hidden given the reclusive nature of their animals and culture. The two men stood with their hands up, showing they were waving the proverbial white flag.

Thank the gods we were docked on the relatively empty side of the port. All this commotion would have alerted the guard had we been on the other side. There were only a few people, who were looking over at us curiously and without alarm. Fights broke out here constantly, so this was nothing they hadn't seen before.

I saw Alexa racing down the street, a satchel hanging from her slender frame. Out of breath, she jerked to a rapid stop beside me and opened the satchel. Just in time, too. Lysander's hand twitched, meaning he was coming around. Shit, shit, shit. We needed to hurry.

Alexa handed me gloves to put on so that I would be protected from the iron, and then she handed me what looked like yarn, but made out of pure iron. Together we shifted Lysander onto his stomach, careful not to wake him, pinned his hands behind his back and threaded the iron threads between and around his bare wrists and arms, making it impossible for him to move without having the iron dig into his flesh. I didn't want to hurt him but had no choice. Nothing could disrupt my plans now. I could see steam coming off the ties where the iron touched his skin. I winced, but knew it was the only choice I had.

He jerked awake as we backed up, and his anger-infused snarl startled us. "Donyale, untie me. You have no idea what you're dealing with. This is much bigger than one contract. I promise we will find you a way out of it, but if you go to Giselle, you'll launch this world deep into a war that we're not prepared for. The witch was speaking some truth when she said that someone is trying to overtake our world. I'm here to help, not hurt you. Release me." His voice lowered into a

growl that did all sorts of things to my insides, making them quiver with excitement. What the fuck was wrong with me?

He flipped over on his own but grunted in pain as the thread dug into his skin. He must be extremely powerful for him to manage any movement with that much iron touching his skin. I got nervous that maybe it wasn't enough. He didn't move any further but glared at me as he shifted to his knees and then his feet, towering over me. I took a deep breath and regretted it right away because all I got was a lungful of his addictive scent. Shit, this was going to be harder than I'd thought. Turning away, I looked first to the dragons that had surrendered, then my friends and lastly, the direction we needed to go to meet Giselle and bring her back to the ship.

We didn't have time for this at all. *Get them tied up with a similar thread and keep them separated. Put Lysander in my office and the other two in different rooms. The less they can conspire, the better. Alexa, you and Solara will need to stay behind and guard them and the fucking witch. Mara and I will meet with Giselle and bring her back.*

"You got it. I'll make sure he is nice and secure in your office." Alexa grinned mischievously. I rolled my eyes. I swear, her only thoughts resided in the gutter. I side-eyed Lysander, who hadn't moved, and thought that he *would* look good spread-eagled and naked on the bed when I got back. My panties were immediately doused, the scent making Alexa start coughing to hide her laughter. Lysander again speared me with that brilliant cobalt-blue look. I didn't blush; I was way past that stage in life. I just raised one eyebrow at Lysander, whose nostrils flared, inhaling my scent. His face took on a pained visage, making me grin. Let him suffer with a hard-on until I got back. Fucker deserved the pain after what he'd just pulled.

Alexa had had the good sense to bring enough iron for all three dragons. They wouldn't be going anywhere or causing any problems any time soon. Waiting on Mara, I checked to make sure I had what I needed: proof that I had the witch and the letter confirming who I was. Mara joined me and, with a touch on my arm telling me she was ready, we walked at a fast clip to meet up with the person that would free me.

## CHAPTER TEN

We walked through several parts of the city and finally arrived at the wealthier districts where Giselle had asked that we meet. Being of high rank and privilege, she stayed close to her creature comforts. I had met many witches, and most were humble and preferred to stay close to Gaia's gifts. But this family was different. I don't know what happened to push them away from nature's embrace, but they preferred to live in the city and craved material gain. They were richer than most monarchs and wielded power like it was a toy. I never understood why they preferred to play these games and didn't care. I needed an out and she was it. Giselle was definitely the lesser of two evils. The witch was considered "good" by most people's standards. She was known for giving back to the community, helping the poor and offering charity to orphanages.

We approached the Knights Cross, a well-known pub that the wealthy frequented. I stood at its entrance and took a steadying breath.

"I got your back, Don. I'm here." Mara's reassurance steadied my nerves.

We pulled the door open and strode in. I spotted her immediately. She was the woman surrounded by guards, but it wasn't only her retinue of protection that distinguished her: it was her face. She looked identical to the witch, only with silver-blond hair instead of green. She was beautiful in an ethereal way, looking more like a fairy than a long-lived human. She could have been in the blush of her youth, if you

didn't know who she was. But she was just as old as the witch, which was a reminder to treat her with caution.

I wove through the crowd, coming closer to her table, which was in the back-left corner of the room. I was about twenty feet from the table when the guard noticed my direction and focused their attention on Mara and me. Giselle looked up at the movement and I caught her eye, nodding a greeting. She smiled and nodded in response.

“Let her through. She is a friend.” Her husky voice filtered through the air. She indicated with her hand that we should sit.

I glanced at Mara, who made eye contact with me and gave me a quick nod indicating we were safe for the moment. Mara could sense danger a mile away. In addition to her gift of the earth element, she had a sixth sense when it came to imminent threats. She was also one hell of a warrior, so it was good to have her at my back. I scooted into the booth seat across from Giselle. Mara remained at my back, facing Giselle, vigilant as always.

“Let's dispense with the pleasantries, shall we? I need to see proof that you have her. I won't leave this part of town unless I know for sure I can bring her back with me.” She sipped her tea calmly as she asked her questions.

I didn't know if she could understand sign language, but I responded the only way I knew how. *She is on my ship, safe. She has been kept under lock and key for obvious reasons.* I reached into my jacket to retrieve the ring we'd taken off her hand to prove we had her. *This is your family's crest, isn't it?* I laid the ring on the table between us.

She set her teacup down and picked up the ring. “This was my mother's. She gave it to her when she turned sixteen. She was the eldest, you see. So, the heirloom went to her, never mind that she would dishonor our family name within a year from that moment.” Disgusted, she put the ring back down on the table.

“Alright, this is what we will do: I will accompany you back to your ship and see for myself that my sister is well and truly caught. We will then void the contract and free you from

its bindings. I need to examine the contract first to make sure that I don't trigger any of the nasty spells she may have embedded in there. Over time, she has learned to harness power differently, and has earned her reputation for violence and cruelty." Eyes turning hard as diamonds, she spoke the last few words with a bitter edge, and I could see the resemblance now.

"Let us go, then." She swiftly stood and was immediately surrounded by her guard. How in the hell were we going to get back to the ship unnoticed? I sat still, and I guess she was used to being obeyed because she turned expectantly toward me.

*We cannot attract so much attention, and you kind of stick out.* I indicated her retinue as I signed.

She looked to Mara for an explanation. And here I was thinking she knew sign language. Way to make a girl feel seen and heard. Fucking witches.

"You have quite a large guard, lady. We need to get to the ship unseen. We don't want to attract the wrong kind of crowd," Mara stated bluntly.

"Don't worry, I can cover our journey to your ship. No one will know or see us heading there. But I will not leave my guard, for any reason." She said the last directly to me as if I had some ulterior motive. I only needed her for one thing and then she could get lost for all the fucks I gave.

I stood and waited for her groupies to head for the exit before following, Mara close behind me. She stood a few inches taller than me, black hair tied in intricate braids, blazing black eyes scanning the room. Her curves made every male shift in his seat. She always attracted men like bees to honey. Too bad for them, she was only into one kind of guy, and they were far from here. That never stopped her from getting off with someone else, but it was never anything more than a physical release. Mara was drop-dead gorgeous on a bad day, and today she was on top of her game. The funny part was that she knew she the effect she had on men but only chose to pay attention when she needed to blow off steam.



We walked out as men's heads swiveled like owls, following her all the way out the door. Maybe bringing Mara with me hadn't been such a good idea. We could have used glamour to hide in plain sight, but goddamn Lysander had fucked up all my well-intentioned plans.

We met up with the rockstar and her groupies out front. Standing in front of a large plain carriage, the guards waited for us to jump in. Giselle was already seated comfortably on one side. Mara and I climbed in and sat on the opposite side, facing her. Another row of seats was situated behind Giselle and us, plenty of room for her additional guards. They made their way to their seats and waited.

Giselle looked at Mara and me and sighed, "Where to, ladies?"

Mara gave them the location of our ship and the carriage jerked into motion. No one spoke on the way to the ship. Giselle pretended we weren't in the conveyance with her, closing her eyes and humming slightly. I figured she wanted to focus her energy given she was about to see her sister for the first time in hundreds of years. I kept my eyes on the road, making sure we were heading in the right direction. Mara was tense beside me, listening to her sixth sense, I'm sure. I noticed the guards kept sneaking quick glances at Mara, especially the one sitting next to Giselle.

I turned and faced him fully, giving him the *go fuck yourself* look. He glanced at me, blinked and then quickly shifted his gaze to look out the window and away from my friend. Not that Mara cared, but it bothered me that everyone, including women, looked at her like a piece of meat. She didn't deserve that.

Mara's hand reached over and gave me a light squeeze on my thigh. She knew everything that was going on around her and she was trying to tell me she appreciated my protectiveness, but she didn't need it. She used their keen attraction to her advantage most times, wielding it like any other weapon she'd mastered over the years.

Our surroundings started to change into the familiar part of the port where our ship was docked. I stiffened in my seat and the guards noticed immediately; taking their cue from me, they became even more alert. Giselle still hummed softly, her eyes closed. Maybe she was in a trance of some sort... Witches were very different than other magic users. Gaia granted them powers that allowed them to manipulate the elements, yet they were not elementals. They could also cast spells but were not magicians or mages. It was a mystery, and one that had been closely held for a thousand years at least.

We stopped in front of our ship. I reached over to open the door and a spear blocked my way. Mara immediately pulled out her dagger. “Don’t worry, they aren’t threatening you. They will simply exit first and make sure it is safe for us to venture out.”

Jerking my head in her direction, Giselle sat calmly, eyes open and aura glowing like a beacon. I sat back but gripped the handle of my daggers. I didn’t call my sword to me, knowing it would be too obvious a weapon, but my beloved daggers would not draw undue attention. I channeled my power, too, just in case.

Giselle smirked, thinking my paranoia funny, I guess. I hadn’t survived this long by being trusting.

Ignoring her, I waited for the guards to do their thing and allow us to exit. My anxiety was ramping up. I was getting so close to finally being free that I was worried something would fuck it all up.

Her voice cut through my musings. “I will need a couple of hours to review the contract’s magical bindings. I want to make sure I understand all the triggers that could result in a negative outcome. It is best to be safe. I need to know what I will encounter. My sister wasn’t very powerful as a young witch, but over time she’s learned to steal great power through these contracts, and she got quite good at locking in certain guarantees.”

Her revelation that she needed two hours to look at the fucking thing set me on edge. I thought she could come in and

just break it—and break her sister in the process. *FUCK!* I needed to be free *now*. A niggling worry had also rooted itself in the back of my mind that she wouldn't go through with it. She was more powerful than her sister and could just take her. What would prevent her from doing so?

“I know what you are thinking. I'll honor my word. I won't go back on our deal. This is simply me being smart. You should never go into a situation without knowing what the possible outcomes are. I've survived because I learned this lesson the hard way, a long time ago.” She turned to me as she spoke, and something flashed in her eyes. It looked like sympathy.

I wasn't a victim, and I didn't need her pity. I returned her look with a hard one of my own.

“It's clear, milady,” the guard who had sat next to her said as his face popped through the doorframe of the carriage. I jumped up, Mara right behind me, and exited. We waited impatiently by the ramp to our ship. Giselle was assisted out of the carriage by her guard. Still wearing her rich burgundy cloak, she didn't look like she belonged in this part of the city. She had lifted the hood to cover her hair, so all you saw was her lightly tanned face and stark blue eyes. The same eyes that had mesmerized me when I was a young woman, eager to fall in love with my prince. The feelings of betrayal and caustic pain erupted in my chest. I wouldn't revisit those moments again. Turning, I walked swiftly up the ramp.

Mara met me on the stern of the ship. “Are you okay? You look rattled.”

*I'm fine, she just stirred up memories best left forgotten. Let's get this over with. Go below deck and make sure those dragons are out of sight. She will need a room to examine the contract in private. I don't want anyone, including her guards, to have the opportunity to see them.*

“You got it.” She slid down the ladder and disappeared.

“Where can I review your contract?” Giselle's voice sounded from behind.

Turning, I indicated with a sweeping gesture that we needed to go below deck.

She nodded solemnly and three of her guard separated and went down first, presumably to make sure it was safe. Not sure why she needed so many guards as she was the most powerful witch in the world. But whatever, maybe she was conserving her energy.

One of the guards popped his head back out. “All clear, milady.”

She walked to the ladder and descended gracefully. I followed closely behind her.

“This way.” Mara’s voice floated up to me as I climbed down two levels. Placing my feet on the floor, I watched as Mara led Giselle and her guards to Leanne’s lab.

Leanne stood outside, serene in her white healer’s robes. She looked up and caught my eye. She opened her mouth, but I shook my head, indicating she should remain silent. She nodded and waited patiently as the guards inspected her room. They filed out and Giselle stepped in.

I went back up the stairs and directly to my office, needing to grab the original contract for her inspection. I walked quickly down the hallway and opened the door. I found Alexa sitting on a stool by my desk, watching my bed.

She glanced up when she heard the door open and nodded. Her way of saying it was good to see me. She looked a little worn out, her auburn hair in a messy braid, streaking along the sides of her face. Her dark-green eyes were shadowed with exhaustion. The dragons must have put up more of a fight after we left to get Giselle.

I quickly stepped into the room, then shut and locked the door behind me. It was then I heard movement coming from the opposite side of the room. I turned and my jaw dropped. Laying on my bed with only the sheet covering him was Lysander. He had been magically gagged. He was wearing one of the special amulets we had purchased in anticipation of capturing a conscious and screaming witch. He was glaring

daggers at Alexa, and then his focus shifted to me and heat replaced his rage, though not by much.

*I thought you were joking. How the hell did you get him in here and naked?* My breath hitched at the end. My mouth watered at the display of flesh, and my center throbbed for what was underneath those sheets. Ugh, I needed to get a grip and quick. I turned my back on him. Out of sight, out of mind, right? No dice for me. I couldn't get the image of that powerful body and that devastatingly handsome face out of my mind.

“It wasn't easy. Leanne had to help. She doused him with some sleeping powder she's been hoarding, and he dropped like a stone. It took all three of us to get him undressed and into bed. He started waking up as we got him tied up nice and neat.” She smirked, knowing what this male was doing to me. “I can smell your arousal, Don. If I were you, I'd take advantage of the situation. He's still bound by iron so he's somewhat subdued, and he won't speak—even better...” She stood and stretched, working the kinks out of her body. She then frowned. “He should be in a lot of pain with his skin touching iron, but you wouldn't know it from his behavior. Maybe iron affects dragons differently.” She shrugged and took a few steps to stand directly in front of me. Her face transformed to that of my trusted advisor, all business.

My imagination was running wild with the possibilities, but I shook my head to clear it. Now wasn't the time. I signed, *I need to get the contract to Giselle. She needs time to examine it and make sure she doesn't trigger any negative outcomes. Or at least that's what she said.*

“Is that a good idea? She could be using that time to figure out how to use it against you instead,” Alexa whispered, as if that would prevent Lysander from hearing what we were saying.

*I have no choice, do I? We just need to be prepared in case she decides to betray us.* Walking over to the wall adjacent to my desk, I removed the frame hiding my wall safe and turned the dial with the combination. Opening the safe, I looked inside at the glowing, golden piece of parchment. Butterflies

fluttered in my belly. This was it: the moment I'd been waiting for in what seemed like forever. Taking a deep, fortifying breath, I pulled out the rolled-up parchment that represented the biggest mistake I'd ever made at a mere sixteen years old. If I opened it, only I would see what was written, but if I gave it a command to allow someone else to read it, it would grant them temporary visibility of its contents.

Turning to Alexa, I could see my excitement reflected in her eyes. She knew what this meant, for me but also for my family. She more than anyone understood what it was like to live in exile as a result of poor judgement and youthful dreams. Nodding to her once, I gripped the contract in my right hand and reached for the door with my left. I caught movement in my periphery and looked toward Lysander. He was trying to break his restraints, his eyes blazing at me in rage and frustration and something else I couldn't quite name. He had made it clear that he would try to stop me, but it was too late. My goal was in my sights, and nothing would prevent me from getting back what was taken from me.

I stood with my hand on the door, making eye contact with him, Alexa standing quietly by my side. Something inside me was trying to pull me toward him like a cord persistently tugging, yearning to go to him. The strength of that sensation was nothing I'd felt before with anyone, and it was unnerving to say the least. I'd known him less than a few weeks, really only since he'd shown up on my ship saying he was there to help us with the witch. There was no reason I should feel anything like the emotions I felt now.

Alexa touched my arm, letting me know I needed to go. "Go. I'll make sure he causes no trouble. Solara and Mara are watching the other two. While they weren't as creative with their restraints, those dragons won't be getting up to do anything any time soon." She smirked and gave me a little push. Nodding and turning the door handle, I pulled it open and stepped out into the hallway. Giselle was one level down from where I was. Leanne preferred peace and quiet while working in her lab, which meant she had a room that was isolated from the rest.

Arriving at the lab, I noticed Giselle's guards were posted outside her door and on each end of the hallway. Walking past the first two guards, I approached the door to the lab and opened it. Striding inside, I quickly took stock of the room. There was a desk at one end surrounded by bookshelves that held all of Leanne's medical journals and reference books. Giselle sat straight-backed at this desk, hands resting on either armchair, facing the windows looking out over the long stretch of ocean. She looked as if she was about to pose for a portrait. I blinked and looked at the rest of the room to make sure we were alone. Leanne's lab consisted of several long tables that held various instruments of her trade, none of which I could name, though some looked familiar to me from my previous life. I had once enjoyed learning about healing properties of plants from my mother's royal healer. A pang of nostalgia hit me, once again reminding me why I was standing in this room with this particular witch.

She waited patiently, not speaking or moving except for her eyes, which were now on me. Gripping the contract tightly in my left hand, I walked the few short steps to her and placed it on the table. She untied the string and unrolled the parchment and looked at its blank face. She glanced at me expectantly. "I can't read it if you won't allow it, Donyale," she said softly.

Nodding, I reached out and touched the corner of the parchment and shared my intention with it. Somehow the magic in it recognized my command, and sweeping calligraphy began to appear as if someone was spilling the words from a magic ink pot onto the page until the entire front and back of the parchment was completely full of the words that had bound me for nearly 200 years. The contract seemed simple, at least when I read it, but I wasn't skilled in this field of magic—few were—but I knew she would be. As a member of one of the highest courts in our world, she would have been required to learn the legalities of magical contracts given one of her most important duties was to review the treaties, alliances and partnerships that were signed between governments, making sure her king was treated fairly.

“I will need time to review this, and it looks like there are several layers to this contract, bindings that are triggered by events. That is all I can see at the moment, so I must ask you to leave so I may work through all of it and find out how we can break you free. Once done, I will take my sister, no questions asked and no repercussions. Understood?” Her intensity was palpable. I knew by agreeing, I would give up any right to kill the one creature who had caused so much pain to so many people, including me.

“Donyale, I need you to respond in the affirmative, to make it a binding verbal agreement. You won’t be able to kill her if I break you free. But make no mistake, I’ll make sure she does not harm another person as she did you and so many others.” She read me like a book, knowing that I wanted to inflict that pain on the monster myself. The price of her help was for me to give up on my crusade to end her sister. Something inside me rebelled at the thought that she’d go free while so many had suffered at her hands. I balled my hands into fists and forced myself to think of the alternative. At least Giselle had made a commitment to hobble her so she wouldn’t ruin anyone else going forward.

I signed to her and nodded my head: *I agree*. The air snapped between us, sealing our deal.

She waved me off, like some servant on my own ship... High society bitch. Seeing me stiffen at the insult, she raised a delicate eyebrow and waited for me to comply. She never took her eyes off me, making clear she wouldn’t give the contract her attention until I obeyed her.

Feeling like a child being told to leave the adults to their work, I raised my chin, turned to the still open door and walked out, closing it behind me with a soft click.

I needed some time alone with my thoughts and went above deck to get some much-needed air. As I passed the door to my cabin, I felt the pull again, this time with a sharp needle of pleasure-pain. I put my hand on my chest where the discomfort had originated, but then it subsided as quickly as it came. Shaking my head at what I was sure was a sign of pure exhaustion, I climbed the ladder and stepped out onto the



deck. Once again, Leanne stood facing the horizon across the vast blue ocean. Not wanting to disturb her solitude, I started toward my favorite perch on the ship, the crow's nest. It was time to exercise my weakest attribute: patience.

If Leanne heard me step out onto the deck, she made no move to acknowledge my presence. She was a strange one, and that said a lot coming from me. As I walked past her, she finally turned her head to look at me with a solemn expression. She rarely smiled, even on days we had the right to celebrate and kick back. It made me think that something haunted her, robbing her of any joy she should be feeling. It saddened me that she could not find a single thing that made her happy. The only time she seemed content was when she was treating patients.

Not saying a word, but nodding her head once in acknowledgement, she went back to pensively looking toward the horizon.

I returned the gesture and continued toward my destination. Climbing to the top, I settled in for the long wait.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The first time I was forced to sit in the crow's nest, I almost shit myself in terror. Being a child of the ocean, the thought of sitting this high above it made all sorts of things happen to my gut. I recalled how the wind whipped my thin body aggressively, making me think I would topple to my death onto the deck. Most of my time was spent gripping the mainmast for dear life, while my captain yelled obscenities at me from below because I was failing miserably at my job. She kept sending me up every day until the terror subsided and it became second nature to sit at the highest peak of the ship and alert the crew about oncoming threats.

I had never thanked that ornery captain. She taught me everything I needed to know to command my own ship; she was tough as nails and took no shit from anyone. When I first met her, I was a scrawny, starving seventeen-year-old, lost and alone. I couldn't set foot in my mother's kingdom. The contract bound me to live above the sea—if I ventured beneath its waves, I'd risk my own death. At the time, I'd considered ending my misery, but my will to survive always won out. I was solely focused on living day by day and hadn't learned to sign yet, so I couldn't communicate well.

But she saw me begging on the streets and squatted right in front of me and stared into my eyes for what felt like hours. Getting nervous, I started to gather my meager belongings to leave, but she stopped me with a hand on my bony shoulder. "I can help you, if you want it. It'll be extremely hard work, probably something you aren't used to, but it's honest pay and you may learn something in the process."

Her voice was gritty, just like her appearance. She wasn't beautiful, but there was an aura about her that attracted you. She had strength, the type that called to me, inspired me. I wanted to embody that kind of strength. Instead, what I'd become was a burden to society, falling so far from grace that I was a gutter rat now, begging for scraps or coins. I ate maybe twice a week, if I was lucky. I had no skills that were useful outside of the court. I could read and write, but with my voice gone, I couldn't communicate with anyone. The only other option available to me was unthinkable. I couldn't bring myself to sell my body, but I knew it would only be a matter of time. I was crippled—physically, mentally and emotionally—and she...she was this unexpected bright spot in my dreary life that offered so much more, if I would just reach out and take it.

She waited quietly while all these thoughts jumbled around in my mind. What else did I have to look forward to? Not wanting to keep her waiting for fear she'd change her mind, I nodded to her, letting her know I would take the job. She smiled and told me that she'd been observing me for several days and knew I couldn't speak. She then said she had a mute sister who knew sign language, and that she would teach me the language so I could communicate while I worked on her ship. I started crying in earnest, heart aching at her kindness. I had seen little of it since I signed that awful, lopsided contract.

She patted my shoulder awkwardly. "Let all that emotion out now, child. Once you are on that ship, you must have nerves of steel. The crew can smell blood in the water, and you will seem like easy prey to them. You must project an air of confidence, even if you don't feel it inside. Do you understand?" She spoke softly as we walked down the lane toward the market.

Wiping my eyes, I nodded that I understood.

"Here's what will happen: I will take you to the inn and get you fed and bathed," she said, wrinkling her nose.

I blushed in mortification. I hadn't bathed in months, but I nodded.

“We will need to discuss the employment contract and what’s expected from you, and if you still agree, you’ll board the ship in two days and begin your contract. Agreed?”

Once again, she was giving me a choice. I nodded again, letting her know I was in agreement with what she was saying.

“Good. My name is Captain Beryl.” She stopped and turned to me, extending her hand toward me.

I reached out and shook it.

We turned in unison and continued down the cobbled street toward the Crooked Rooster Inn. It was the nicest establishment on the docks. I nervously fidgeted with my appearance, knowing I looked like a street rat. My hair was matted, and I was covered in filth from head to toe. My clothes were rags, just barely hanging on my thin shoulders. As we got closer, people glanced our way curiously and some gave us a wide berth. Captain Beryl was an imposing woman, tall, well dressed with several weapons strapped to her body. She looked more like a warrior than a sailor, and I was sure I looked like a small, helpless and dirty child in comparison. She ignored all of them and walked confidently down the street with me trailing slightly behind her, head and shoulders bowed.

Striding into the inn, she stopped at the bar and whispered something to the barkeep. He nodded and went back into the kitchens, then returned with a woman who was well dressed and in her middle years. “What can I do for you, Captain?” She spoke with a slight accent, and given her appearance, she wasn’t from Lorya. Most Lorians were dark-haired, dark-eyed and short of stature. She was blonde, gray-eyed and very tall. She towered over the captain, who wasn’t a petite woman.

“I need two rooms for the remainder of the week, a bath prepared immediately with two serving women to help my friend wash, two warm meals sent up in an hour—but send some bread, cheese and fruit in the meantime. I also need someone to go to the clothiers and pick up two sets of clothes for my companion, something sturdy that can withstand hard work and sea salt. She will need a full set of clothes as well before we set sail in a week.”

“Alright, we have two rooms that are connected, and I will make sure the other requests are taken care of immediately.” She pulled out two keys and placed them on the bar. The captain, in turn, dropped a bag of coins into her hand. The patroness’s eyes widened at the heavy bag and she hid it quickly. She bowed slightly toward the captain and turned to the barkeep, commanding him to get two servants from the back and prepare a bath. The captain turned to me and handed me one of the room keys.

Following meekly behind her, we went up the stairs and down a well-lit hallway. She paused by a door, looked at me and pointed at it. “This is yours. I will be in the next room. They should be up shortly with a bath and food.”

Walking quickly to the door, I tried the key and it unlocked for me. I grabbed the door handle and glanced over my shoulder at the captain, who was already walking into her room. The door shut quietly behind her. Not knowing if I had just made another huge mistake, I turned the handle and stepped into the room.

The room was spacious but simply furnished. There was a large bed up against one wall, a table for two up against the window and a washroom with a large tub and two washstands in a separate room to the right. A fireplace with two comfortable chairs and a small side table between them was situated on the left, next to the adjoining door that led to the captain’s room. One huge picture window dominated the space, providing a beautiful view of the city and the ocean beyond. Eyes filling with tears, I ran over to the window and closed the curtains. I couldn’t look at the water without thinking about what had happened. Then it hit me: laughing hysterically, I realized that I had just signed on to living on that water. What the hell was I thinking?

Looking down at my ragged clothes and dirt-speared hands, there were no other options available to me that were remotely respectable. Not wanting to sit down on anything for fear of ruining it, I stood in the middle of the room and closed my eyes and breathed in and out to calm my nerves. A soft knock on the door roused me. Walking over, I opened it a

crack and saw the serving maids with buckets of hot water. Opening the door wide, they strode in and began preparing the bath.

It had been a while since I had been able to bathe fully. Living on the streets didn't allow you much opportunity to stay clean. Once the bath was ready, the two maids stayed behind to help me get cleaned up. I was used to the help—after all, I grew up as royalty—but after my time on the streets, I was wary of anyone getting too close or touching me.

Seeing the fear in my eyes, one of the maids, the older one, stepped forward. “We’re only here to help you, but if you prefer, we can leave.” She smiled warmly. “I am Beth, and this is my daughter, Lori.” She exuded a kindness that I hadn't experienced in a long time.

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head, letting her know they didn't need to leave.

They gently removed my clothes, and I heard a gasp from the younger one when they finally peeled the garments off me. I think they were shocked at my state. I was extremely thin and malnourished, with scars marring my back—a daily reminder of the whippings I'd received when I first took to the streets and was caught trying to steal food. I kept my face neutral, hiding my shame behind a mask.

Beth came around front and gave me a warm smile, instantly easing the tension in my body a bit. They helped me climb into the tub, which was luxuriously hot with the smell of lavender and vanilla wafting from it. It felt like heaven. They spent the next hour scrubbing me clean, emptying the tub and refilling it three times before they got all the dirt and grime off me.

And when my matted hair wouldn't cooperate, they asked me if they could cut it short. Seeing tears immediately spring to my eyes, Beth leaned over and patted my shoulder. “It'll grow back, honey. If we leave it as is, it'll be impossible to manage, and besides, it looks a sight. I promise you we'll cut it so it looks lovely and feminine.”

She waited patiently while I debated. What the hell, I could look at it as becoming a new person with a new identity. The hair would feel like me finally starting a new chapter in my life. It was just hair, but because it was still part of who I was, it felt like I was cutting away the last bit of me that belonged to that life I no longer had.

Determination infused my spirit. My hair was a part of who I was, but I was no longer that person. I needed to become someone new. Making eye contact with Beth, I nodded once, letting her know it was okay. She gave me that smile of hers that warmed the deepest recesses of my heart and got to work. Large hunks of hair splattered on the floor and filled me with trepidation as to what the final outcome would look like. Women never wore their hair short. It was considered masculine if your hair didn't at least reach the middle of your back. I could feel my hair fast becoming a lot shorter than that. I remained very still, breathing deeply and thinking about what my new life would be like.

Never again would I be taken advantage of by anyone. I was exiled from home, so I had to make myself a new home, and to do that you needed money. I promised myself that from this point forward, I would learn everything possible from the captain, then I'd strike out on my own and build great wealth that I would then use to hunt that cunt of a witch and my betrayer down. They wouldn't break me, and although they'd come close, in the end they had made me stronger.

Beth gently touched my shoulder. Startled, I looked up at her. "We're finished. We just need to wash it once more and we'll be done."

Just then, a soft knock sounded from the other room. Lori stood and went to answer it. As soon as the door opened, I could smell something delicious, and my stomach growled loudly. Chuckling, Beth got to work on my what-felt-like-very-short hair. Once done, she stood with a large towel, waiting for me to get out of the water so she could dry me off. I reached up to feel my short locks, and nervousness ripped through my belly at what I felt. It was so short, the hair didn't even touch my ears. Sighing, knowing there was nothing I

could do, I got up and stepped out of the tub. Once dry, she wrapped a robe around me and I immediately went to the washstand to brush my teeth. I couldn't go another minute without making sure my mouth was as clean as the rest of me. That done, Beth led me back into the other room. Lori walked past us, presumably to clean up the mess in the washroom.

Seated at the table, I noticed that another plate had been brought in as well: the cheese, meats and fruit the captain had requested. It sat next to the steaming bowl of stew. Mouth watering, I grabbed the spoon and dug in. Beth and Lori were bustling in the other room, so I gave in to my hunger and ate until there was no room left in my belly.

Sitting back, I sighed. I hadn't eaten a solid meal in what felt like ages. Even if I hated the job, I would stick by the captain. A person kind enough to take an urchin off the street and give them a solid meal and a place to sleep, not to mention the luxurious bath and clothes, was worthy of lifelong loyalty. I would be forever grateful to her for rescuing me, because that's what she had done for me. She didn't turn a blind eye and pretend to help me by just giving me her spare coin; she saved my life by offering me a new beginning.

We left a week later, and for the next three decades I worked for the captain, learning everything I could from her, eventually becoming her second-in-command and leading more adventurous voyages in pursuit of that great wealth I'd promised myself I'd accrue. She grew older and frailer toward the last decade and I took on more responsibilities, but before taking over, she sent me to train in combat at the most elite school in the world.

There I met Solara, who was also orphaned and had been taken in by one of the masters of the school. Having developed a sister-like bond with each other, Solara agreed to join me and Captain Beryl. On our journey home we met Alexa and Mara, who were clearly combat-trained. My stories of living on the seas intrigued them. Knowing we could always use strong sailors, I invited them to join us, and they agreed. I came home with those who would become my three best friends, people that I trusted with my life and who I would do anything for.



When I arrived back home, I learned that the captain was very ill. Her health had been failing before I left to train, but I thought she'd recover since we decided to hold off on any more seafaring journeys. Sitting next to her bed and taking care of her for the next few months became my life. Alexa, Solara and Mara stayed with us in our home. The captain had become like a mother to me. She had cared for me, loved me and taught me what I needed to know to survive and thrive in this world. Learning how to navigate the seas and become a fearless adventurer had been her doing. She knew my story and had given me every advantage she could.

“Don't let fear or rage guide you; let love guide you, Don.” Her raspy voice, once strong and full of life, sprang forth in my mind. “You are destined for greatness, but you must leave the festering anger behind. You have so much to learn still, and I'm sad I cannot be there with you to help. The gods decided to make me human”—she smiled softly—“and they are calling me home.” I had to lean in as those last words left her lips, her voice becoming a soft whisper. Thinking this was the end, my chest constricted—she couldn't leave me yet!

Suddenly, her eyes opened wide, as if she could see something that I couldn't. “You will change the world, my Don. I'm proud of the woman you have become and hope you understand how much you have meant to me, daughter of my soul, if not my blood.”

Her eyes moved until they were gazing into mine. She had always been a striking woman, and age had only agreed with her. She had had her share of lovers but never had any children from those relationships. I had been her child in a way; she had raised me and nurtured me into who I was now. “I love you, my daughter. I'll see you again...if the gods are good...” She sighed and was gone.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The wind whipped through the sail, snapping me out of my memory. Sadness filled me; I wished the captain was still here to guide me. I finally had everything I wanted, but doubts assailed me. Was I doing the right thing? I combed through everything Lysander and the bitch that'd caught me in her fucking web had said. What if what they said was true? I'd be the catalyst that ended life as we know it. If those creatures we'd fought on our adventures were in fact from another world, what would happen if they poured in as the witch said? Lysander seemed to agree with her, which only made me angry to a level that confused me. Not wanting to examine the feelings he stirred, I went back to logic.

*Is there a way to free me without opening the door further?* Rubbing my face, I sighed. This wasn't fair. After so many years of fighting, searching and scheming, I had finally found a path to my freedom, and yet I now had to choose between that and everyone else in the world. Could I be that selfish? Thinking back to my time with the captain, my heart grew heavy.

She would expect that I do the right thing for everyone, not just me. Sighing, I got up and made my way down to the deck. The air had softened and gently embraced me, blowing strands of hair into my face, caressing me in a way that made me feel as if the gods were trying to comfort me. Motherfuckers couldn't find it in them to give me a break in all this? Landing with a hop, I strode below deck. I needed to check on the witch first and make sure she was still contained.

Finding Leila seated on a stool sketching was not surprising. She was the most capable of our crew beyond my friends. She looked up, pursed her lips and stood, putting her sketch pad on the stool she had been sitting on. “Captain.”

Eyeing her up and down briefly, I calmly turned to look at the witch, who was fast asleep. *I take it Leanne thought to keep her sedated.*

“Yes, Captain. She was getting out of hand, trying to forcibly remove her constraints, and damaging herself in the process. Leanne thought it best to medicate her to prevent her from harming herself or anyone else. She was quite agitated when she found out you’d left to get her sister.” Leila glanced at the witch in the cell as she stated all this matter-of-factly.

Nodding, I stepped closer to Leila and placed my hand on her shoulder, getting her attention. Startled, she looked at me wide-eyed. *Thank you for staying behind to help. I know you were looking forward to blowing off some steam in the city. After today, you’ll be able to spend some much-needed time away from the ship and work. I appreciate you, Leila.*

The smile she gave me could have lit up the whole room. “It’s an honor, Captain.”

Nodding, I smiled at her, turned and left. Time to settle this shit once and for all.

I went one level up, directly to where Giselle was working to decipher the nuances of the contract. Stopping in front of her door, I knocked and then entered. I didn’t care that she hadn’t called for me; I needed to see for myself what, if anything, she’d learned so far. She sat looking dazed, off in another world. She didn’t indicate she’d heard me enter, so I shut the door behind me loudly enough that she would hear it.

Blinking twice, she turned her head and made eye contact with me. “I’ve read through this and analyzed the magical triggers she embedded within. I was thinking through the options you have when you barged in. You should know that she wasn’t lying. There is another unknown factor in this contract, a new type of magic I’ve never seen before. But I’ve deciphered enough to translate what it means. The contract is

clear: if you break it, it will trigger a series of events that will rip open a portal between worlds.

“There are no details about this other world, only a name: Ylor. It doesn’t mention what will happen once the portal opens, only that it will. The uncertainty here is what we should be worrying about. Yes, I can break this—but should we given what we don’t know?”

I sat down in the chair opposite hers and grabbed a pen and parchment that was sitting on the desk and wrote, *What are my options?* Sliding the parchment over to her, she read it quickly.

Leaning forward, she braced her arms on the desk and took a deep breath. “We could break it completely and deal with what comes, but I will not consent to this. The next option is to keep the contract intact, which I’m sure you don’t want. So the last option is to amend the contract. I can sign as her proxy, demonstrating free will in the agreement, so that it will stand. I cannot give you everything back, so you will have to choose the one thing you want restored. If I try to give you back everything that you agreed to in the original contract, that’s essentially the same as breaking it.”

She sat back, allowing me time to process what she was saying.

Grabbing the parchment and pen again, I wrote, *How can you sign on her behalf?*

Sliding the parchment to her once again, she read it, and frown lines appeared on her forehead. Sighing, she answered my question. “No one can know of this, and I’m trusting you to keep it to yourself.”

She waited until I nodded in agreement, and the air snapped once again between us, sealing us in a silent contract.

“When we were children, teenagers really, she began demonstrating low moral character, leading to undesirable choices. My parents, understanding that she could create a problem for us, decided to place a magical fail-safe to prevent her from causing damage to us or others. They placed a magical condition on her, binding her to their will—and

subsequently mine—that allowed us to make decisions on her behalf. Being underage, she had no choice in the matter. It's the only reason I can break her contracts. She ran shortly after that and disappeared. I've been looking for her ever since, but my sister is very good at hiding. She is a chameleon and eluded me for a very long time, until you came along. I will have my work cut out for me when I return with her. I plan to undo all the contracts she's created." She paused, waiting for my reaction, but I my mind was stuttering with processing all this.

Saying nothing else, she rose, walked around the desk and knelt by my chair. "I ask that you think through this very carefully. The decision is yours, and I hope you consider the potential consequences before letting me know what you choose to do."

A knock sounded and Leanne stepped into the room. "I have food coming for our guests, Captain."

Nodding, I stood and walked out of the room, leaving Giselle and her guards to eat. I wandered over to my captain's quarters, needing to speak to Alexa.

She stood by the windows, gazing out into the blue sea. Turning at hearing the door open, she nodded her head in the direction of the bed in the room. Lysander was still tied up, and there was fire in his gaze as he spotted me that in turn lit a fire between my legs. Grimacing at my body's response and knowing he could smell my arousal, I nodded in acknowledgement and signed that I needed to speak with her. She joined me in the hallway.

*Giselle is done reviewing the contract and she has given me three options. Each is risky. Option one: she can break it completely, but that will rip open a portal between our world and a world called Ylor. That's the place those creatures come from. She said that's not something she's willing to do, so it isn't really an option. Option two: keep the contract as-is, which changes nothing. Option three: amend the contract, but I can only choose one thing to be restored. This last option is a way to keep the doorway from opening further, so it's a compromise. I've waited so long, Alexa, and now, it's as if it*

*was for nothing. I know it's selfish, but I deserve nothing less to have everything restored to me. I think I've earned it.* Frustration carried through in my communication to her, my hand motions sharper than usual.

“And she said there's no other options? Giving you more than one item to be restored isn't possible?” Alexa's voice was low, making sure it didn't carry any further than the two of us.

*I inferred that anything more would risk breaking the agreement, which would result in opening the portal completely. This is not at all what I expected when we set out on this mission. I wanted to be free of her and the awful mistakes of my past. Without releasing all of my powers, I can't go back home.*

Alexa touched my arm in sympathy. She more than anyone understood. Her life hadn't been easy, nor had she been able to return home. “We'll figure this out. One power returned is better than none, right? Maybe we can create a new plan to figure out how to keep that portal closed and still have everything returned to you. It will be our new mission. Solara, Mara and I will work with you to figure this out and restore what's yours.”

Smiling through my tears, which I refused to let fall, I took a deep breath. *Thank you for always being there for me.*

Alexa's eyes also glistened with tears, but she nodded solemnly.

Turning back, the walk to Leanne's lab seemed like a walk on the gangplank in shark-infested waters. Uncertain as to how the situation could be resolved, the only answer was to compromise and continue to search for a way out. Night had descended, and it looked like Leanne had lit the lanterns in the hallway leading to her rooms. Ignoring the guards standing at attention outside, I grasped the door handle, took a deep breath and faced Giselle.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Seated across from her, we stared solemnly at each other. Thinking about what I would want restored had created a nagging headache on my way here. There was only one power unique from the others that rose to the top of my list. Reaching over and grabbing the parchment, I wrote two words: *My voice*.

She scanned the parchment, glanced at me and held my gaze. “To be clear, you want your voice and its power to be returned, correct?”

*Yes. It’s the only power that is unique to me. My fire, water and earth elemental powers were not what she was after when we signed the contract. It was my voice. There must be something specific about it that she would make such a request. I don’t know what it is, but it must mean something.*

Sitting back, she quietly studied my face, looking for answers I didn’t have. Sighing, she sat up straight. “The reason she wanted your voice was twofold: Its ability to compel is one of them, but the other is altogether unique. Your voice has a power that isn’t seen on this world. It can create and destroy, specifically things that are made from natural elements. It can unravel or unmake anything with an elemental essence. In our world, that’s practically everything in existence; in other worlds, it would be very nearly the same. This isn’t a Fae gift, Donyale, it’s something altogether different. I tell you this because you must understand the nature of this burden.” Urgency bled through in her tone.

*How do you know this? I never experienced any of what you describe.*

“The contract has hidden magical layers, remember? When delving deeper than the top layer, there was language about each power taken. The others were the standard elemental definitions, but your voice had very specific language. I’ve never seen or read of a power like this. And even though all your abilities are extremely strong, stronger than most, this one is the one that you must be most careful with. Especially since you are untrained in it. If your decision stands, I would ask that you find the Temple of Vilai in Skolos to get help with understanding this ability. There reside experts that help untrained, powerful elemental users learn to master their gifts. I don’t believe anyone else would be able to give you what you need to help you with this ability. I will add that as a condition to the addendum.”

*What? I should decide where I go to get trained. This is just another way to control me.* My anger rose swiftly. How dare she? Of course, she didn’t understand what I was signing, which gave me a moment to compose my thoughts before writing them down for her to read. *I’m not in agreement with including this training as a condition. I should choose where and who trains me.* Whipping the parchment over to her so fast that it went airborne for a second, she glanced down and read my words once the parchment settled on the desk.

“Understand that I don’t do this to control you, Donyale. The teachers at the Temple are the only ones who can even decipher your power in a way that might allow you to manage it. Anyone else and you risk the same issue you did with my sister: being taken advantage of to suit their own ends. I gain nothing by this but to sleep better at night knowing you aren’t running around inadvertently using this power without realizing it. As I said, it’s a *condition* of this agreement.” Her face set in stone, she waited for my response.

I could feel my blood rising, anger infusing my limbs. *If you add that condition, I won’t release your sister to you.*

“Then we are at an impasse. Listen, I want my sister back, but I know that you will not release her. I am patient. I can



wait until you tire of her, or tire of not having your power restored. Either way, I don't lose anything from walking away. It is *you* who needs *me*."

She stood as if to leave.

Thoughts swirled in my head, different scenarios of what could happen if we didn't amend the fucking contract. None of them led to an outcome I was willing to accept. Closing my eyes in defeat, I grabbed her wrist as she was walking by me. She stopped and waited.

I wrote three words that I hoped I wouldn't regret: *Fine, I agree.*

"It's settled then." Her voice didn't change in pitch. I was a wreck inside but couldn't let her see it. "I shall begin drafting the addendum tonight. The sooner we get this done, the sooner I can get back to my duties. The draft addendum will be ready for you to review first thing in the morning."

*How do I know you won't try to hide something in the addendum like your sister did?* My suspicion was starting to bloom. What was to stop her from shackling me some other way?

Sighing, she stepped back around the desk. "You may not believe me, but witches are taught to be fully transparent about any deal they make, written or not. The language must be explicit, and each party clear on what they are agreeing to. That doesn't mean that unethical practices don't exist or will occur.

"Know that I have nothing to gain from deceiving you. We both want my sister under control and stopped. I made a promise to my parents that I haven't been able to fulfill for over nine hundred years, Donyale. I want this as much as you do, so it's in my best interest to be forthcoming with you about all of this. The condition wasn't something I had intended to do, not until I read what you possess. It's an unbelievably dangerous gift, especially in one who is untrained. You only had your powers for sixteen years, and that particular one probably hadn't manifested yet. And we don't know how it will once we sign the amendment. My only hope is that you

will do your duty with haste and get to the Temple without incident. There is nothing I can say or do that will create trust between us. I am a witch, and the only experience you've had is with my sister, which destroyed your world as you knew it. I'm here because I want to be." She held eye contact the entire time, looking down at me like a regal queen.

*If this power is so great, why did she not use it before now? She's had it this entire time, so it doesn't make sense that she wouldn't take the opportunity to leverage it for her own gain.* I scribbled the last part, my anxiety bleeding through the writing.

Giselle sighed after reading what I wrote, "I am not entirely sure, but I think this power is uniquely yours and no one else. It's not like your other elemental gifts. Those are common among Fae. Even if you had given this one over freely as this contract entails, it could be that her abilities extend only to other Fae abilities. I've never heard of this power being a Fae ability, it is reminiscent of Titan power. While she holds the power, she cannot access it."

I sat there in shock. A Titan ability, how the hell was that possible? But she did say she wasn't sure, so she could be wrong. Right? I mean, the implications of having a Titan ability were astronomical, to say the least. I blinked a few times and focused on my clenched fists resting on my lap. I didn't know how long I sat there, processing what she had said. She patiently waited for my response. What fucking choice did I have?

Nodding, I stood and extended my hand, the traditional practice of deal-making in my world.

She extended hers and grasped mine in a surprisingly firm grip. "Come back first thing in the morning and I will have it ready for you to review." She walked over to the window, her way of dismissing me again.

Gritting my teeth, I left the room. Time to plan our next trip. I had no idea where this Temple in Skolos was. All I knew of the place was that it was the dragon-shifter kingdom.

No one ventured there without an invitation if they didn't want to risk their lives. Fuck, things were never easy!

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A knock sounded on the door before my friends, including Leanne, walked in. We were in one of the empty sleeping quarters to discuss what I had learned. After relaying everything Giselle had said, we sat in silence, each of us processing the information.

Mara's voice broke the silence. "Skolos is notorious for killing those who don't have an invitation when they set foot on their territory. Dragons aren't exactly friendly with outsiders. It's also landlocked, which means we'd have to release the crew to find other work and risk losing them altogether."

She was right. We would have to dock the ship and go inland to follow through on this condition attached to the addendum.

Solara's husky voice chimed in, "Unless we are willing to pay them a small fortune to stick around and keep the ship seaworthy while we go with Don to the Temple. Assuming we can get someone to issue an invitation."

"I'd rather part with a small piece of my wealth than let this crew go," Alexa said. "They are the best group of sailors we've ever had, and they are loyal, Don. It was difficult to find good women to sail with us. Most don't think of seafaring as a profession, which is something we've talked about changing, but if we let them go, we set ourselves back by at least several decades in the talent we've managed to acquire." She was right. It had taken many years to find the right crew. They

were also each Fae or part-Fae and were long-lived. Finding them had been like a treasure hunt in and of itself.

“You realize that getting an invitation won’t be as difficult as we are thinking, right?” Leanne interjected. We stared at her quizzically, and she continued, “We have three dragons on this ship. What if we made a deal with Lysander? He can either issue an invitation or get us one if it must come from an official representative.”

Leave Leanne to state the obvious.

Her comment made each of my other friends squirm uncomfortably. We hadn’t treated Lysander and his groupies very well, so this would take some convincing. But she was right. They were here, and they were dragons. Could they get us into Skolos and to the Temple? This was about expediency.

*Let’s say he agrees, we make our way to the Temple and who-knows-how-long passes before the trainers believe I’ve mastered my ability. How long are we willing to be away? Should we all go?*

“Well, I won’t pass up on some dragon cock, so I’ll be going,” Alexa said. “I hear they have some special abilities that make other Fae and humans pale in comparison. I need to validate these claims myself.” She grinned gleefully. Always thinking about cock, seriously.

“My pussy is getting wet just thinking about it,” Mara joined in, squirming as if she was trying to relieve the tension between her legs. Looking at Solara, who was snickering at their antics, Leanne sighed and rolled her eyes.

“What? And you don’t have to wonder, Don, because you’ve had a piece of that dragon dongle already, over and over again, if I recall correctly. Is it as good as they say?” Alexa grilled. Being the focus of four pairs of horny female eyes, I froze for a second and then busted out laughing, triggering everyone else in the process.

Needing to break the tension, we laughed until tears streamed down our faces. It’s not like it was the funniest thing Alexa and Solara had ever said, but it brought a bit of levity to

the situation, a welcome release given everything we'd been through and had in front of us. Wiping the tears from my eyes, I looked at each of my friends. Reaching out, I took Leanne's and Solara's hand on either side of me. Alexa and Mara followed suit and did the same. Saying nothing but conveying everything I was feeling, I gazed into their eyes, one at a time, and showed how much it meant for me to have such wonderful friends.

Taking a deep breath, we got back to the business of planning. *Okay, our first approach will be to talk to Lysander and see if we can reason with him. Maybe if he knows we aren't breaking the contract, he will be more open to helping us. Then we pay our crew to take a short sabbatical while we go to Skolos. Alexa is right, we need to keep our crew intact. We have more than enough in our reserves to cover the cost, so we don't have to dip into our personal stash. If Lysander doesn't help us, we need to send a letter to the Lyrian ambassador asking for his help in obtaining an invitation. We will need to send it through the fastest means possible, which may mean paying him to send it magically. That will be expensive, but will get the message delivered in a day versus months.*

"Sounds like a good plan B, Don. Though what happens if we get to the Temple and they aren't accepting new students?" I scowled at her, and Mara threw her hands in the air. "Hey, I'm just thinking about worst-case scenarios here. There's a possibility they aren't going to help you. What then?"

"It was Giselle's idea that you go there—a demand, really. What if instead she provides an introduction and a letter explaining the need to accept you?" Leanne's face was set in a slight frown as she said this. Her *thinking face*, we liked to call it.

Glancing at the others for their thoughts, Solara took a breath. "It makes sense. She's the one making it a condition, so you should be able to ask her to help you get in. She may also be able to send a missive asking for an invitation to enter Skolos as well. It can't hurt to have multiple people working to help us gain entry to the dragon kingdom."

She made a good point. *Okay, it's settled. Step one, get Lysander to issue a formal invitation, and if he can't or won't, we go to plan B and send missives to both ambassadors. I'll go tell Giselle to add that to the addendum as well. It's better if it's in writing, right? Once done, we sail for the Port City of Amoralia. I need you guys to map our journey from there to Skolos. It won't be easy, so we'll need to ensure we've got all the details accounted for: lodging, a guide if Lysander refuses, supplies and who from our crew we will choose to go with us...*

Nodding their heads, we stood in unison. “Yasss! Dragon cock, here we come...pun intended.” Alexa pumped her fist in the air. Gods help us, she was going to leave a trail of dragons in her wake. Laughing again at her antics, we exited the room. My heart feeling lighter than it had in a long time, I started to mentally prepare myself for the discussion with Lysander.

The hallway was quiet, and when each of my friends headed in their own direction to work through the tasks assigned, it added to my nerves. Frowning at my own reaction to facing Lysander, I shook it off and entered the room. He must have been asleep because he immediately jerked his head toward the entrance, blinking rapidly. A tiny sliver of guilt wormed its way into my chest for how we had incapacitated him, but then again, he *had* tried to stop me from seeing Giselle and finding a way out of that fucking contract I'd been stupid enough to sign. And now we were all part of the mess I had created so long ago.

I found myself pulled toward him by some unseen force, my body alight with some sort of tingling and fire that sent sparks of arousal to my core. Gritting my teeth at the sensations, I tried to focus on what was ahead, which would be a hard enough conversation without my body screaming to be penetrated by his. He watched me closely, his chest rising in tandem with his rapid breathing as sweat trickled down his temples. Not knowing what this connection was, I was at least glad I wasn't the only one affected.

The enchanted pendant rested at the junction between his neck and chest. Reaching down and trying not to touch his

skin, I removed it and placed it on the side table next to the bed. Lysander didn't say a word as I removed it, which was surprising; he'd certainly had a lot to say previously. Maybe he thought that tactic hadn't worked and had decided to wait for whatever came next.

Sighing, I turned back to my desk and wrote what I needed to ask of him. I could feel his eyes on me as I was writing, once again driving my body insane with need. Whatever this was, it wasn't good, and I didn't like it because I couldn't control it. I had to figure out how to neutralize it. Leanne could help, I'm sure. Shaking my head, I reapplied myself to the words I needed to say, writing them down for him to read.

Finished, I placed the parchment on the side table and leaned over and turned the lamp brighter. Lysander hadn't moved a delicious muscle, but his eyes followed me wherever I went. Grabbing the stool, I sat, grabbed the parchment and held it up for him to read. He didn't even look at it so I shook my hand to get his attention. Reluctantly, he shifted his gaze to the parchment.

While he read, I took my time admiring his gorgeous face. He was ruggedly handsome, with a strong jaw, straight nose, high cheekbones and full lips. I'd always heard stories about the beauty of dragons, but thought they were referring to the animal, not the person. Lysander's blue-black eyes looked like brilliant black opals in the dim lighting. His long black eyelashes would make any woman envious. He also had a charisma that almost glowed from within that only added to his attractiveness. It was more than his looks that lured me in.

I didn't notice that he had finished reading and was examining me in a way that made intense warmth flow through my body, tightening my nipples and making me wet. Snapping out of my reverie, I waited for him to speak.

"Let me get this straight: you want me to invite you to my home after you literally imprisoned me on your ship?" his voice rasped out, gritty with anger.

Taking back the parchment, I wrote down my reasoning for incapacitating him, for which I felt totally justified. Placing



it back in front of his face, he read quickly and just stared at me for several minutes in silence. He worked his jaw, grinding his teeth. The sound penetrated the space between us. He wasn't going to cooperate...

“Donyale, I need you to untie me. Only then will I be willing to speak to you about this new proposal you present. I won't be tied up like a fucking criminal while you try to negotiate an agreement that requires something most sacred to me.”

Writing down my conditions for untying him, I placed the parchment in front of his face once more.

“Fine, I won't try to exact any retribution for tying me up with iron. But I will need my clothes and weapons back. That's not up for negotiation. I will parley with you on equal ground.” The last part wasn't something I was comfortable with. Giving him back his weapons could backfire. But in the end, I relented, putting on my leather gloves before proceeding to untie him. He spent several moments working the blood back into his limbs, again not saying a word to me, watching me intensely the entire time.

“Get out. I need to change and don't want you in here while I do it.” Bewilderingly, I was a little hurt by his demand and the tone in which it was delivered, but I did as he said and walked out. His weapons were stored in the room across the hall, so I darted in and grabbed them while he finished dressing. Nodding his head once, he reached out for his weapons and I handed them over, careful not to touch his skin again.

The fire he had initiated in my body was a steady burn now, keeping me in an aroused state that needed relief soon. Concentrating was becoming increasingly more difficult the longer I was in his presence. He looked completely unaffected except for the muscles along his jawline, which kept flexing as though he were working through some physical discomfort. Glancing at his wrists, I noticed that the iron had left its mark; the sight speared me again with guilt. Shaking that feeling off as ridiculous, given what had transpired, I walked back into the room, and he followed.

“Where are my men? Are they harmed?”

Shaking my head no, I wrote that they were being held in separate quarters but were safe and unharmed. Reading the words swiftly, he handed the parchment back to me. Was it me or was he taller and wider than I remembered? Frowning, I backed up and put some space between us. Moving around the desk, I sat down. He remained standing on the opposite side, towering over me and making the large room feel like a damn broom closet. Looking him up and down, I noticed a hard ridge in his trousers. Maybe he wasn't as unaffected as I'd thought...

His harsh voice snapped me out of my mouthwatering fantasy of licking his hard cock again. “Why do we need to go to Skolos? I need to know everything, Donyale. This is not an easy thing you demand.” He stood with his arms akimbo, making him look dangerous and amping up my desire to uncomfortable levels. Damn him, he looked completely unfazed. This shit had to stop. I had lost complete control over my body, as if it had a mind of its own.

Pushing away thoughts of being bent over again and fucked hard, I took another piece of parchment and wrote everything down. There was little I needed to hide. It would be revealed once Giselle was done with the addendum anyway. I kept the part about creator and destroyer magic to myself; I only mentioned the need to be trained given I'd be graced with one of my abilities after we signed the addendum.

“What about the portal? Will it change from signing this addendum? Those creatures currently spilling through have already begun to change our world. They release certain toxins that harm our atmosphere. If any more come through, it will accelerate.”

He stopped at that last part, catching himself. What did he mean, “changing our atmosphere?” I wrote the question down.

Sighing, he finally sat down in one of the armchairs on the opposite side of the desk. My neck thanked him for it. “The creatures emit some form of toxin that has increased the levels of certain gasses in the air, changing its composition. I don't

know everything that goes into this, but our scientists have been studying it for decades. It's changing our air, literally, and if not stopped will eventually begin killing off native sentient beings. Plants don't seem to be affected, which is strange, but regardless, that's why we must close the portal. Opening it any further will destroy all life as we know it."

I was stunned. *What the fuck!*

It made sense, I guess. At every port we'd visited, there was news of a new disease that attacked the lungs; people were falling prey to it all over the world. Why hadn't we known that this was being driven by the creatures that showed up out of nowhere?

Lost in my thoughts, Lysander's voice startled me. "The first sightings were recorded about two hundred years ago. The creatures seem to have a greater affinity for water than land, but we've encountered some strange and vicious animals in the deepest recesses of our forests and have had confirmation from other kingdoms that they've experienced the same. They seem to stay away from populated areas, but maybe it's because they aren't here to attack us directly, but through other means. It's a mystery, Donyale. One that every kingdom is actively working to solve."

I barely heard anything after "two hundred years ago." Gut clenching in dread, I asked him if he had the exact date of the first sighting. Frowning after reading that, he shook his head in the negative. "We have archives that state all the details surrounding those sightings, including the dates, but I didn't commit them to memory. What we did find out was that it was linked to an event that took place here. That portal required an anchor on each world. It led me to you."

*How?*

He seemed to understand me. "We knew that portals only open through very specific magic. That magic is traceable, and we've sent out hunters over the past two hundred years to track down the source. We found the portal, and our best trackers were able to ascertain that a very specific kind of magic was used—a witch's contract, to be exact—that opened

it on our side. In addition to that, they found traces of a very unique type of magic, one that isn't native to our world. They tracked it to you.”

Sitting back, I processed what he was saying. They'd been searching for me for two hundred years. By finding the witch, they'd found me. The pieces were coming together, and the picture they painted terrified me.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The door swung open, revealing Mara. “We think we have a solid plan. How are things going here?”

Giving Lysander the side eye, I didn’t respond. Instead, I let the silence speak for itself. Where did we land? Was he going to help or not? Turning my head, I found his eyes boring into me. He growled softly, making my insides quiver, but I didn’t back down. No one dominated me outside the confines of sex.

Nodding slightly and without taking his eyes off me, he said, “I will issue an invitation on several conditions. First, you will free my men and allow us to come and go as we please. Second, you will be completely open and transparent about what you are planning once we reach Skolos. Third, my men and I will lead the expedition to get to my home country, and I will be the final authority once we are on land and underway. And last, no secrets between us, Donyale. If there’s anything that might put my people in danger, you must agree to share that knowledge with me as soon as you know about it.” He had inched forward, leaning now on my desk as he laid out his conditions. His delicious scent wrapped around me. But his words, specifically the last two conditions, put a sour taste in my mouth.

Mara stood at the opening of the door, waiting for my response and wearing what we called her *poker face*. She knew the last two items on his list were going to be the sticking points of our agreement for me. Once I said yes, I was bound to them, and I was a woman of my word.

Taking my time, I considered what he was asking for and turned each item over in my mind, contemplating the implications. The first two were less worrisome. If the tables were turned, I'd ask for the same. The third was a fair request; if he led us to Skolos, it only stood to reason that he had to be the one making the decisions on the journey there. The last condition was the one that made a bit of worry bloom in my chest. If he knew what Giselle said I could do with my voice, would he somehow use it against us?

As the silence continued, my awareness of that pull became stronger. There was a thread connecting Lysander and me, and the more I examined it, the more real it became. Rubbing the center of my chest in agitation and wishing the gentle pulses the thread emitted would go away, I looked back at Mara, briefly trying to get a sense of what she thought. Still wearing her mask, she imperceptibly moved her head in agreement.

Lysander hadn't moved, nor had he taken his eyes off me. The intensity of his gaze was intimidating, but I wouldn't let him know that it affected me in a very different way. My panties were getting soaked through with desire for him. The room suddenly became too warm. I saw his nostrils flare, and his eyes immediately dilated and started to glow brilliant blue, telling me all I needed to know about his awareness of my state.

Wanting to get this over with and my body under control, I responded to his conditions with two of my own. *I will agree to the first three conditions. The last will be based on my judgement and mine alone. If I believe any information I currently have or come to possess will be an immediate and dangerous threat to your people, I'll share it as soon as I learn of it. Do we have an accord?*

Mara translated, and Lysander's face transformed from broody and angry to sexy and sinful with a smile that could make any woman of lesser constitution drop her fucking panties and bend over. Ugh, I had to get away from this dragon soon. Some space would help clear my thoughts.

“We have an accord.” He reached over and waited for me to shake his hand, the one that had so thoroughly explored my body just days ago. Keeping away from him after that first time had been torture, but I had a will of steel and I would not fall prey to his sexual charms, no matter how otherworldly they were. Taking his hand, I shook it quickly and stood. Mimicking my motions, he stood as well, towering over Mara and me.

Standing in awkward silence, Mara cleared her throat. “Lysander, I can take you to see to your men, if you’d like.” The tension in the room, so thick you could cut it with a knife, felt suffocating. Taking one last lingering look at me, which only made me clench my thighs behind my desk to try and relieve the pressure building there, he left.

Mara looked back at me with a gleeful smirk. Bitch, she knew what he was doing to me, and he hadn’t even touched me. Something weird was going on with my body. It had never reacted this way with any other male. But then again, most of my companions had been human, and for a very good reason: I didn’t trust shifters. My business dealings with them in the past had been a pure disaster. Every single one of them had double-crossed Captain Beryl and me. I knew what she’d say: *Don’t paint them all with the same broad stroke*. But it was hard when each encounter only added fuel to the negative stereotype of their species.

Sitting down in a huff, I rubbed my chest again, trying to examine what exactly was happening with my body. The feeling of being physically linked to Lysander was bizarre to say the least. Wanting to understand it, I closed my eyes and concentrated on remembering when I had first felt it. Going back to the night I’d had the best sex in my two hundred years, I stripped away all the hot and heavy pieces and tried to recall if we’d had the connection then. I remembered feeling something when I saw him in the hallway waiting for me. Going back further to the first time I took note of him, which was right after we put the witch in her cell, I frowned. I tried to recall if there was any spark of that thread then. It was the first time I noticed how attractive he was, but no connection

existed then. So, going back to the night we fucked, I examined what was different.

My memory was excellent—some called it unreal because of how I remembered small, minute details. My eyes shot open: the fucking pendant he was wearing outside the witch's cell was missing when we'd had sex that night. He had worn that thing from the very beginning and said it kept a glamour in place to keep him and his mercs as obscure as possible for anyone who saw or interacted with them. It was a safety measure that was needed as we hunted the witch to keep them inconspicuous in crowds. But could it have been blocking whatever it was that now linked us?

Mind racing a thousand different directions, it stopped abruptly on yesterday, when we left to meet with Giselle. Something had happened to me on the ship that strengthened that connection. I had seen the most beautiful vision of what felt like souls intertwined in pure unconditional love. Tears sprang to my eyes.

But what did that vision have to do with me or this connection with Lysander? Not finding any answers, I sat back in my chair and thought about what he'd said regarding those creatures. Before signing that dreaded contract with the bitch from hell, our world had been healthy and thriving, the sky clear of any toxic air. Over time, a thick layer of mist had permeated the air, blocking out the sky entirely in some cities. Could these creatures be responsible for this change? Why? Did Giselle know?

Standing in a rush, I ran out of the room, intent on speaking with her. Finding the guards blocking my way, I tried to push past them. Her lead guard—I guess the captain himself—walked over from his place by the door.

“I'm sorry, Captain Donyale, but Giselle asked not to be disturbed as she works on the addendum. I can relay that you came by to speak with her, if you wish.” He said it with slight disdain, as if being a messenger was beneath him.

Stepping back, I shook my head no and left. I could wait until tomorrow to ask her. She was the king's closest advisor.



She would corroborate Lysander's story or not. In the meantime, I went to check on Solara, Alexa and Leanne. I needed to let them know what Lysander had shared, and what I had agreed to in exchange for his help in getting us into Skolos.

Finding them in our quarters, I relayed everything that had happened, leaving out the parts about the connection I felt with Lysander. Until I knew what this was, I didn't want them to worry about it.

Solara spoke up. "Good, I'm glad we worked that out. We had our own plan, but it was contingent on too many uncontrollable variables. Are you worried that he might cause trouble with these conditions?"

*No, I think he will honor his word so long as we honor ours. He seems very sincere in his concern for his people. I think he will lead us there and get us to the Temple. What I worry about is what we'll find there once we arrive. I don't like this level of uncertainty in any voyage. But to meet Giselle's conditions, I must follow through on my end.*

"Okay, then we should probably work through the different scenarios that could arise and have a game plan for each. We should be prepared given how little we know of what we're walking into. You look like you're about to fall down in exhaustion, Don. Go get some rest. We got this."

I trusted all of them implicitly, and rest did sound good. Leanne stood and guided me back to my office. She carried her medicinal chest. Typical healer.

She helped me change the sheets because they smelled like Lysander, and I knew my body wouldn't rest if I was swimming in his scent. Once done, I went behind the screen and changed into more comfortable clothes. I normally slept in the buff, but with Lysander around, I wanted some barrier in place, even if it was flimsy at best.

"Captain, I want to share something with you: In my travels, I've learned and read about a lot of phenomena related to shifters. While there isn't much written on dragons, what I have found indicates that they possess the greatest magical

abilities out of all species. As a matter of fact, dragon lore states that they are made of pure elemental magic and were the first shifters to be created. The others came to be when dragons imbued them with their magic. In a sense, they are the creators of all shifter species. They are powerful, Don. We must be on our guard.” She said all this while checking my vitals, and gave me a small tube filled with a teal liquid. She’d given this to me before, when I had trouble sleeping.

Taking a piece of parchment and a pen from my side table, I wrote a message for Leanne. *Did you share this with the others? They need to know—and make sure you account for this in your scenario planning. We need to be able to get out of any sticky situations we find ourselves in. It will take about two weeks to reach Amoralia. We’ll need to work through our plans by then. Considering this isn’t part of our plan to get into Skolos, Lysander doesn’t need to be involved.*

“Yes, I did share it earlier, and I’ll work with them to design several tactics if we find ourselves in trouble with the dragons. Get some rest, Captain. Tomorrow is a big day.” Leanne stood, dimmed the lights and left.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Don, you need to wake up. Giselle says its time.”

Alexa’s voice pulled me up from the depths of a dreamless, restful sleep. It couldn’t have been more than a few hours ago that Leanne had walked out and I’d fallen instantly asleep due to exhaustion. Rubbing my face and sitting up, I found Alexa backing up to give me space.

*What time is it?*

“It’s just after two a.m. You’ve only been asleep for four hours. I know you need more rest, but Giselle is adamant that we need to get this done as soon as possible. Something about the witching hour that I couldn’t understand. We need to get you up and over there now. You still need to read through the contract and make sure you’re ready for whatever happens—physically, I mean. I’ll have Cook make you something to eat as well. He’s up anyway, preparing to go to the market to purchase supplies for our next voyage.” Alexa ran around the room grabbing clean clothes and my boots.

Dropping the clothes on the bed and the boots on the floor near my feet, she stood with her hands on her hips while I tried to shake the cobwebs from my mind. Rising, I went to wash my face and brush my teeth, hoping that would help me wake up. Dressing quickly, I followed Alexa down to Leanne’s lab. We found Giselle drinking coffee. She looked exhausted and not at all like the sophisticated, elegant, not-a-hair-out-of-place witch we’d met yesterday. She must have exerted a tremendous amount of magic because the air was thick with it.

Mara, Solara and Leanne were leaning against the lab table on the opposite side of the room, looking a little worn out as well. Giselle unfolded herself from her chair and grabbed a piece of parchment. She extended it to me. Grabbing it, I read its contents. Not seeing anything missing or different from what we had discussed, I handed it back.

*We need to add that you must provide a letter that will gain me entry and training immediately from the priests at the Temple of Vilai. I don't have the luxury of waiting years to be admitted. I'm sure that with your status and notoriety, you can ensure they will not turn me away or put me on some waiting list. I also need my friends to be allowed to stay on-site with me. They need to make room for them as well.*

Alexa translated while Giselle settled herself back in her chair. The parchment lay on the center of the table, a stark reminder of my ignorance and stupidity as a child. My stomach was roiling with nerves. This was it. I'd soon get one gift back after two hundred years of waiting and searching.

“As you wish. It'll take me a few minutes to add that into the addendum, and then we can begin.” Her voice sounded normal despite the exhaustion showing in her eyes.

Nodding, I left with my friends closely following behind. We waited by the ladder leading to the upper levels, seating ourselves on the floor. We didn't talk; there was no need. As the silence stretched, my nerves got worse. What if Giselle put something in the contract I couldn't see? What if she betrayed me like her sister had?

Feeling warmth seeping into my left arm, I glanced over and found Solara giving me an encouraging smile. “No matter what, we're here with you and for you, Don. Whatever comes, we'll face it together. And if the witch thinks to double-cross you, we *will* end her. She may be powerful, but together, so are we.”

Taking a deep breath, I nodded.

Heavy footsteps sounded above us, and we all stiffened. We collectively held our breath, hoping they'd bypass the ladder leading down to this level. The closer the steps came,

the warmer my body became. Closing my eyes, I knew who was above us, and he could likely sense me as much as I sensed him. The booted feet paused and then resumed, only this time they were descending the ladder.

Standing, we watched as Lysander's big body made its way to us. Landing softly, which was amazing considering how large he was, he turned around with the grace of a predator. His eyes first located me and ran down then back up my body, inching my desire up several notches before he briefly took note of the others next to me.

He walked right up to me, and I had to crane my head back to maintain eye contact. "Looks like you were starting without me. Should I be offended, *Captain?*"

The way he said "captain" prompted a spurt of wetness out of my pussy. Angry, I couldn't understand why my body and mind weren't in sync. I didn't want to be a slave to this arousal he triggered. It was almost like a fog overcame my mind while my body responded like it was starving for a drug that it needed to satisfy a deep, all-consuming hunger.

Not wanting to show the effect he had on me, I quirked one eyebrow and answered his question. *You weren't invited, Lysander. This doesn't concern you in the least. The deal is between Giselle and me. I already told you what would happen and that it won't rip the portal open further. There's no danger to your people, so there's no reason for you to be here.*

Alexa's voice rang out as she interpreted what I said.

I wasn't going to justify why my friends were here. That was none of his fucking business. Damn male. It was worse because I literally wanted to jump his bones right now. The heat coming from my core could melt stone. He knew it, too. His nostrils flared slightly, scenting my desire and triggering a growl from him. Taking a step back for much-needed space, I waited for him to react.

"I hope you are being truthful, Captain."

*I do not lie, Dragon.* No, he was just pissing me off. I had enough to deal with without adding this arrogant male to the

list. Hearing the door open, I brushed by him, trying not to make any physical contact, which was difficult because he basically blocked the hallway with his bulk. I could hear him following close behind me. Annoyed, I rushed into the room with Giselle and attempted to close the door in his face, but he was right behind me, so, shrugging as if it didn't bother me, I let him in. My friends spilled in behind him, varying degrees of annoyance on their faces.

"It's done," Giselle announced. "I will complete the missives after we sign the addendum." Glancing at Lysander, who was leaning on the wall next to the door, I reached out my hand to read the addendum one more time. Handing it to me, Giselle then primly drank her tea.

Reading through it a few more times, trying to see if there were any hidden traps, I was about to hand it back when Lysander's voice penetrated the silence. "I can see several layers hidden within the addendum, Witch. Care to share what's included in those?"

Startled, I first looked at Lysander, who hadn't taken his eyes off Giselle, pinning her with predatory intent, eyes burning a cobalt blue. Giselle, on the other hand, didn't bat an eye. I had no idea Lysander could read the magical intention in contracts. But then again, I'd never asked. Scowling at him, I waited for Giselle to respond.

"Who are you? I've been on this ship for more than a day and haven't seen anyone else but the captain and her first officers."

"Who I am is none of your concern. What *is* your concern is whether that addendum is hiding specific language the captain has not been made aware of. If that were the case, you could basically strip away her power while absconding with your prize. Now, care to explain? Or shall we settle this in another, more violent way?" The growl at the end of his last sentence made clear that he would follow through on his threat.

Glancing between them, I could see that Giselle was a little intimidated. Her throat bobbed at his threat. "Those layers are

to protect the captain from the contract's additional loopholes. I'm not hiding anything. If you prefer, you may examine the layers."

Afraid he'd stumble upon the addendum that would reveal my power, I quickly jumped in. *There is no need*, I tried to sign.

But Lysander was already moving. He didn't touch the parchment but held his hand over it, and the parchment floated and split into three: the physical parchment itself, a thin layer of white glowing magic and another layer that was soft blue.

Not knowing what he was doing, I reached for the parchment, then it was over before I could touch it.

"She doesn't lie. The layers are magical protections for you and her in the event someone else tries to sunder the deal." He never took his eyes off Giselle as he said this. She in turn nodded her head regally. Backing away from the desk, he resumed his post by the door.

Tired of waiting, I gripped the parchment and read through it one more time. All seemed in order. There was a fountain pen on the desk that I picked up, and I quickly signed my name next to Giselle's before something else happened to delay the inevitable.

There was a zing in the air and a painful punch in my chest. Doubling over, I gritted my teeth as pure golden light traveling from the hallway speared me, lifting me up into the air. I couldn't see anything beyond the golden light but could hear panicked shouts as if from a distance. I was consumed by gripping agony tearing through my body.

As suddenly as it occurred, it left, dropping me in a heap on the floor. I ached all over, the sounds in the room still muted as my body adjusted to the abuse. Slowly, I became aware of the voices and what they were shouting.

"What the *fuck* did you do to her?" Mara's fury carried through in her words.

"I did nothing. The foolish child signed the addendum before I could explain what would happen to her upon placing

her signature on the page.” Giselle was calm, as if having four powerful Fae ready to tear her limb from limb was an everyday occurrence.

Gently moving my aching head, I saw my friends on one side, power radiating from each of them, even Leanne. Moving my eyes toward Lysander, he was not by the door; instead, Giselle’s guards had poured in, squeezing into the increasingly cramped space of my office. Not being able to see Lysander or Giselle, I started to sit up and immediately felt Leanne’s healing touch on my arms. Welcoming the pleasant feeling, I stood, facing Giselle.

What I saw shocked me to the core. Lysander had Giselle by the throat, rage pulsing off his body, hitting me square on, which spurred a flurry of reactions in my body. Lustful fire lit me up from within, followed by a need to kill. Swaying from the blast of emotion and gripping the chair in front of me for support, I had to defuse the situation quickly before we all killed each other.

I started to sign, but no one was looking at me. My friends were facing off with the guards, who also seemed to have some magical power available to them. Leanne was still learning sign language; trying to keep me upright while also keeping a wary eye on the confrontation, she couldn’t have understood me even if she’d noticed my signing. Giselle and Lysander were both deadlocked, one waiting for the other to trigger an all-out war on my ship. Frustrated, I tried again, and that’s when I remembered.

“Stop.”

Vocal cords rusty, it came out as a thready whisper. They didn’t hear. Clearing my throat, I tried again, putting some intention behind my words.

“*Enough!*”

This time, my voice rang out, stunning everyone in the room. All heads whipped in my direction, startling me and forcing me to take a step back on wobbly legs. I could feel myself falling. Leanne caught me in time, helping me into the chair I was holding onto.



It was the first time I'd heard my voice in over 200 years.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tears pooled in my eyes, a joy so pure and wonderful that it pierced through my heart. I could feel my jaw trembling and took a deep breath. No one had said a word, as if frozen by the sound of my voice.

Testing it out some more, I spoke again, this time in a more moderate tone. “Please, stop.” My vocal cords strained with new use, tight and uncomfortable to say the least. “Put her down, Lysander. I don’t believe she tried to hurt me. This was a consequence of altering the contract.” I locked eyes with him. His were bright blue and pulling on me physically. Shaking my head, I was touched that he cared enough to defend me.

Glancing over my shoulder, Solara, Mara and Alexa had their eyes glued to me, shock and happiness shining through them. They stayed in their positions as I turned back to Giselle. She stood there, nothing but elegant, as if a dragon hadn’t almost ripped her head off.

The room was too small for all these people, so I said the only thing I could. “Everyone out. Giselle and I need to finish this. Mara and Alexa, get the witch ready for transfer. We need to make sure we follow through on our end of the deal.” The low growl coming from Lysander indicated he didn’t like my orders. Well, too fucking bad. Clearing my throat and working through the discomfort, I directed my next statement to him.

“You need to leave as well. This is between Giselle and me and no one else.” The heat emanating from his eyes could have burned through steel. I held my ground, not saying

another word yet holding my breath. He seemed to barely be holding it together, and I could see out of the corner of my eye Giselle pivoting to face him ever so slowly. Yes, she sensed it, too.

The brilliance of his blue eyes slid behind closed eyelids, and I felt like I was finally released from some spell. I was surprised to feel highly aroused. In fact, I was ready to tear his clothes right off. Taking deep, measured breaths, I watched everyone leave. Lysander went last. After what seemed like an eternity, he opened his eyes and I saw midnight blue. Giving us one last lingering look—to Giselle in warning, to me in a way that made me clench my thighs together—he left. Damn he was hot.

“It seems he’s a bit overprotective of you,” Giselle said. “Watch that one. He’s not telling you everything, Captain.”

Giselle’s voice cut through my sexual stupor, prompting me to face her directly. “What do you mean?” My voice was now almost a whisper, vocal cords tightening further due to the abuse I was putting them through.

“He is not at all what he seems. I have only ever met a few dragons in my lifetime. They’re extremely secretive and reclusive by nature. However, they are the most powerful beings on this planet. This one tore through my protective shields like they were made of parchment. I’ve never felt that kind of power before. He easily disabled me. Had you not spoken when you did, I don’t think I would have survived him.” She said it so matter-of-factly that she could have been speaking about someone else. No fear bled through her voice.

Puzzled, I made a note to talk to my friends about what she’d said. It wouldn’t hurt to be even more vigilant and watchful of Lysander and his crew while we worked together. I wasn’t trusting by experience, but if the most powerful witch around was warning you, you should probably pay attention.

“Thank you for the advice. Now, I suggest you put pen to parchment and write your recommendation of admittance to the Temple for when we arrive. I’ll check on your sister and make sure she’s ready.”

Nodding in agreement, Giselle sat and began composing her letter.

“Quick question, Giselle: how is it that your sister is so susceptible to iron? It’s a Fae weakness, but I was advised to use iron to contain her. They wouldn’t explain why, though.”

She responded without looking up from the parchment. “When she bound Fae in contracts, she stole their powers. These powers carry with them an essence that is purely Fae in form and substance. She’s been absorbing that substance for over eight hundred years, at least. It has become a permanent part of her physiology. She’s no longer just a witch. The powers she absorbed came with weaknesses. Those she absorbed as well. Very few people knew of this phenomenon when they dealt with her, otherwise she’d have been captured long before now.”

Processing this new information and feeling more myself, I stood up slowly and left to find Mara and Alexa so we could hand over the fucking bitch who ruined my life. Good riddance. Even though I didn’t get to sever her head from her body, I was almost relieved that I’d at least gotten back the one thing I missed most. I was selfish, but not so selfish that I would condemn millions of people. I could live without fire, water and earth elemental abilities. I’d lived without them for centuries, and it wouldn’t be a hardship to continue to do so now.

The sea was calm as we neared the halfway point in our journey to Amoralia. It had taken us a few more days to corral the crew after Giselle left with her poor excuse of a sister. Her face had been marred in defeat, shoulders hunched and feet shuffling off my ship. The sight was pathetic compared to the regal poise and grace that walked behind her.

After we finished our business with the amendment, Giselle proceeded to fully bind her sister’s power. She made sure she would never again use any of her abilities, for good or evil. You could hear the witch screaming for mercy, begging Giselle not to take everything she had left, but her pleas fell on deaf ears. Giselle had hardened her heart to her sister and confined her to live an ordinary, dull life. While she would

continue to live out her days in comfort, her existence would be a miserable one.

We set sail as soon as we had the supplies loaded, my crew excited to be on another voyage again. They were a restless bunch, always looking for some new adventure. Lysander and his dragons stayed to themselves, keeping to the aft and away from the crew who eyed them suspiciously.

Lysander and I, by mutual unspoken agreement, steered clear of one another. If he saw me on deck, he'd place himself as far away from me as possible, while I did the same. It didn't stop the pull I felt toward him, but distance helped. It was a strange feeling to say the least. During quiet moments, lulled by the gentle waves of the sea, a strong feeling of longing would overwhelm me. In those moments, I would glance around the ship and find his eyes on me, pulling on my spirit in some strange way. I fought it, just as I think he did, given he would look away angrily.

We were only a few days from port when disaster struck. The skies were overcast, a dark miasma misting the horizon. One of the crew in the crow's nest gave a shout of warning. Solara was standing with me, and we both looked into the distance where the sailor pointed. A dark mass approached. Grabbing the spyglass, I zeroed in on the mass. My gut clenched in anxiety at what I saw.

“Pirates. Three ships to our one.”

“Can we outrun them?” Solara's voice sounded right in my ear.

“Not likely, they're all clippers. We're fast but not fast enough.”

Cursing loudly, Solara jumped into action and directed the crew to unfurl all sails. The wind was moderate, so I would have to use air to move us out of range. These were the predators of the sea. If we took them on, we'd die. It was simple as that. They were still too far away for me to determine who they were, but something told me I didn't want to wait around to find out.

The crew scrambled into action, everyone knowing their job and ready to get us out of range. Mara arrived in time to steer the ship, taking over for me. I needed to concentrate fully. You'd think using air while sailing across the ocean would be easy, but it was actually more difficult than on land. You had to account for the different currents and adjust them just so, for if you went too aggressively you could create a storm that would tear your ship apart and take everyone down to their deaths. My mentor equated the skill of mastering air to that of weather magic. It was definitely a more delicate and sensitive element than earth, fire and water. One misstep and you could create unimaginable catastrophes that could level cities.

Closing my eyes, I pulled on the essence of air. Just like before, it came immediately. I started slowly and built up speed as fast as I could without harming the ship. We reached maximum velocity quickly, Mara directing me when to maintain speed or continue to push. The ship was groaning, letting us know that it was just barely holding it together.

As I maintained our velocity, I tried to reduce the air in the sails powering the clippers that were still advancing on us. Here I met resistance. Trying to reduce the amount of wind in one area while increasing it in another was extremely draining. Control was key. If you lost it, the currents would clash and create something new, usually to the detriment of everyone within close vicinity.

“Don, they aren't slowing down. In fact, they're speeding up,” Mara shouted.

“There's something blocking me.” Feeling around, I realized what it was and snapped my eyes open. “They have an air elemental on board. They're counteracting everything I'm doing to slow them down. Fuck, we need to prepare for battle.”

At that time, Alexa was walking past us as swiftly as possible, fighting to stay upright through the blasting wind. “We cannot take on three pirate ships, Don. One-on-one or maybe two, we could possibly survive, but three? No. We need to switch tactics.”

She was right of course. Thinking through possible options, one dawned on me. “The dragons. Can they help us?”

Rushing past Alexa, I found Lysander watching the oncoming threat.

“I know what you will ask,” he said. “I cannot. No, only as an absolute last resort. We made an oath not to reveal ourselves unless there is a life-or-death situation. We still have time. I can, however, use my water abilities to increase the speed of the current we’re sailing. It may help us stay ahead of them.” His blue-streaked eyes were glowing slightly. My guess was that he was using his dragon sight to determine how far off the pirates were.

Nodding my head sharply, I agreed to his idea, even though frustration coursed through my body at his refusal to shift. Taking what I could get, I moved to shout new orders to my crew, gearing them up for a hard battle.

Maintaining the wind in our sails wasn’t draining my power too much yet, but the longer I kept this up, the harder it would be to fight alongside my crew. Knowing that I needed to keep my energy stores high, I reached deep into the ocean and asked my grandfather for help. And it did come, but not in the form I envisioned—and not before the pirates were upon us.

The blast of cannon fire was all that could be heard. Screams and shouts from all ships joined the cacophony of noise. We were taking injuries, but still holding it together. Lysander switched from aiding the current to using his element to attack the enemy ships. My air magic was no good in this kind of fight; I could just as easily cripple our ship as theirs. It was more of a blunt instrument than a surgical one. Lysander had better luck, manifesting spears and long tentacles of water to create chaos on a couple of ships. His dragons did the same with their elements, though fire couldn’t be used. We could burn all the pirates but were in such close proximity that any flame would rapidly jump from their ships to ours.

Alexa was focused on keeping the grappling hooks from latching on. Mara and Solara were shooting arrows from

several perches on the ship. The rest of the crew were busy trying to kill the pirates that made it onto our ship while shooting cannons to keep their ships at bay. Of course, they were trying not to sink us. They were after my ship. She was a prize, one that would catch a fortune if sold. But we wouldn't go down without a fight.

I was fighting alongside Leila, one of our best fighters, when I felt a sharp, tearing pain in my side. Glancing down, I noticed something protruding from my ribs. I turned toward the assailant and saw a gruesome-faced pirate grinning at me with a mouthful of brown-and-black teeth. I had a second to think about how disgusting that was before collapsing onto my knees.

Leila's shout sounded far away. I blinked rapidly, trying to focus, when a thunderous crash pulsed through the air, wiping out all sound for several seconds. Leila was kneeling in front of me, the headless corpse of the pirate who'd stabbed me behind her, spilling his blood all over my ship. That stain wouldn't be easy to remove. That was my last thought before everything went dark.

Waking up to a stabbing pain in your ribs was awful. I groaned out loud. What the hell happened? The last thing I remembered was Leila telling me something about being okay. Then it came back to me: the pirate attack, the deafening sound right before my senses went completely black. I must have passed out. Touching my side gingerly, I could feel a bandage, and the pain was more like an ache. Something else must have woken me.

Leanne was immediately in my face. "Donyale, can you hear me?"

Nodding yes, I grimaced at the soreness in my back. "How long?"

"Three days. You were stabbed and they nearly killed you. But Leila was smart enough to keep you stable until I could get to you. You were lucky, Don. A few more centimeters to the left and you wouldn't have survived." She busily checked my bandage to make sure it was secure.



“What happened after I passed out?”

She flicked her eyes up at me and then stood back. “We had help. They arrived just as the pirates were getting a strong foothold on our ship. Lysander and his dragons destroyed one ship without shifting, but the tide was turning in the pirates’ favor, then someone else showed up and helped us defeat the remaining two ships. It happened so fast; one minute they were gaining the upper hand, and the next, they were sinking to their watery graves.” She said all this with a frown on her face, as if she was still puzzling out the details of what happened.

“What is it?” I rasped, finding my throat extremely dry and reaching for the water. She immediately leaned over and grabbed the cup and bringing it to my lips.

“You will need to speak to Lysander, but there is much he hasn’t been telling us. Captain, he shifted into a dragon when you were stabbed. Completely lost any semblance of rationale thought or behavior. He was enraged. He was the reason the tide turned in our favor.” She spoke intently, removing the cup when I began to sputter and cough at her revelation. Setting the cup down, she helped me sit up, which brought a twinge of pain in my side. She gently rubbed my back while I tried to get my coughing under control.

“We took heavy hits. The ship’s barely holding together, but it’s seaworthy enough to get us to Amoralia, assuming we don’t encounter anything else that is out to kill us.” She started gathering her supplies, stowing them away in her chest, when she paused and looked at me. “You should know, Lysander hasn’t left your side since you passed out. I had to give him a sedative to help him sleep. He’s been almost unbearable, growling at anyone who gets near you. I’ve never seen this before, at least not outside the shifter species, when their shifter mates are threatened. Considering you aren’t a shifter, I can’t make sense of his behavior. One minute he doesn’t want anything to do with you, and the next he’s crouched by your bedside, a menacing presence warning everyone but me away. Alexa, Solara and Mara almost came to blows with him because he wouldn’t let them near you.” Shaking her head at

his behavior, she moved to the small table and finished packing up.

“Now, are you up for some food? You’ll need to sit up and eat something light.” All business now, she gave me her full attention.

Not knowing what to make of Lysander’s behavior, I set it aside for now. There was so much we didn’t know about dragons. About the only thing I knew was that dragons only mated with dragons, so it couldn’t be what Leanne was implying. And besides, I wasn’t allowing some strange bond to dictate my decisions. I had no intention of mating with anyone, much less the overbearing brute who knew the effect he had on me. Just thinking of him made my sex drive inch up several notches.

I couldn’t delve any deeper into those thoughts. Forcing myself to concentrate on my ship and friends, I nodded to Leanne that I could eat. “How is the crew? Did we lose anyone?”

“We lost five, Don. Another dozen were injured badly enough that they needed to rest several days to recover. My healing abilities sped things up, but some were in pretty bad shape. And everyone was worried about you and whether you’d pull through. I can’t tell you how relieved they’ll be to hear you’ll make a full recovery. They love you.” Her voice softened at the end.

My heart warmed at the sentiment. I’d always had a strong bond with my crew. As soon as I was able, I’d have a burial ceremony for all those bravely departed souls. I shared as much with Leanne. Smiling sadly, she helped me sit up and left to get some food.

Grieving for those who had been lost, I didn’t hear the door open. Three sets of arms wrapped around me, holding me while I cried. They shared in the grief with me. It was a day you never wanted to experience, losing members of your family. While these three and Leanne were my close-knit family, my extended family was comprised of my crew. We’d lived, loved, bled and cried together for decades. You got to

know each other and build a community in the process. It always hurt when that community was harmed.

Sniffing, the four of us looked at each other solemnly. Nodding my head that I was okay, they each gave me some space, spreading out on the bed. “How are you doing, Don?” Alexa asked.

Turning toward her, I gave an honest answer, “I feel like shit, but I’ll survive.”

“The crew will be relieved. They’ve been on edge these past few days, worried for you. We can now tell them that you’ll make a full recovery. Leanne mentioned the wound was deep—it was a very close call,” Mara chimed in.

“There’s a lot that’s happened that you missed, but we’ll wait until you’ve eaten before unloading on you.” Leanne walked in just as Solara finished what she was saying.

“I want to hear it now. You talk, I’ll eat.” The food smelled so good that my stomach rumbled loudly.

Laughing softly, Solara began relaying what happened after I passed out. “After you blacked out, Lysander lost his shit. He shifted and incinerated the ship furthest from ours to ashes. I nearly shit my pants, thinking we would burn with the enemy. Yet somehow, he shielded us. I could see where the fire slammed into something that I assumed was a protective shield. There was a low vibration that I could feel in my bones and the heat from it felt sweltering. Fiery waves shimmered as it met the shield. In a few seconds, he turned the ocean into a blazing inferno. Then, as he was turning toward the other ship, the sea around it exploded.”

Solara took a breath, then continued, “Giant tentacles battered the pirate’s ship, wrapping around it and crushing it to pieces. The pirates jumped ship but were then swallowed whole by a gaping maw waiting in the water. I’d never seen its like in all my life. I think—we think—it was a leviathan that came to our rescue.”

“Lysander had forced his other two companions to shift,” Alexa said, “and all three dragons were airborne, circling the

creature, ready to attack, when the friendly monster just swam away. It was the strangest thing we've ever seen. It was as if the creature was sent to help us. As soon as it left, Lysander and his dragons shifted back and landed lightly on our ship, which is in pretty bad shape, by the way. He wouldn't let anyone but Leanne near you. He didn't say a word, just kept growling and snarling at everyone. Is something going on between the two of you other than the hot sex?"

Leave it to Alexa to ask the question they were all thinking.

"Not that I'm aware of. He has expressed his desire to stay away from me and I echo the sentiment. Sex was phenomenal, but he has the attitude of an adder: moody, dangerously angry most of the time and unpredictable. No, there's nothing going on besides the one time we had sex. I have no idea why he'd react that way." I couldn't meet their eyes as I said this.

Silence reigned for a few moments as my friends processed my assertion. They didn't believe it, but I had no other answer. I didn't know why he behaved that way. For one thing, I wasn't a dragon, so there was no way I was mated to one, and two, I barely knew the guy. Yes, he was sexy as sin and I wanted to jump his bones every time I saw him, but that was just a physical reaction. He wasn't very personable or likable. We'd only ever had a conversation after I released him from his bonds. While that hadn't been unpleasant, it wasn't a get-to-know-you session where we explored each other's interests. In other words, it wasn't a date. All I'd wanted from him I had gotten, and now something had gotten mixed up in the process. Well, I would deal with it later. I had bigger issues to handle, like how bad off my ship was after that fight.

"What of the ship? How is she?"

"The mainmast was the only thing that didn't take a hit. We have holes that we're working to patch up from the cannon fire, but most are above sea level. One, though, is giving us problems. We're taking on water, slowly, and we'll need to dock to fix that one. One of their cannonballs struck the bow. We'll make it to Amoralia, but it'll be slow going. That's added at least another three to four days to our journey. We

have some of the crew pumping out the water that's coming in, so we need to rotate our crew around the clock to ensure we don't go down." Taking a breath, Alexa paused while I finished the last of the hearty soup Leanne brought for me to eat.

"So, we have some crew injured and unable to work, another portion is ensuring we don't sink and the remaining crew members are manning the ship. Did I get all that?" My voice sounded harsh, even to my ears.

Mara nodded and clarified, "Yes, and there's another thing: we told you that the creature left, but something has been following us at a distance. It's not being aggressive, and we don't sense danger. As a matter of fact, Jaron, one of Lysander's dragons, says that he thinks it's guarding us. Lysander has been MIA since you were hurt, and even his dragons have stayed away from him because of his behavior. But they won't tell us why he's acting that way. I don't like saying this, but his dragons—or 'guards' as Jaron has called himself, along with Soryn, the other guard/dragon—have been helpful, taking on tasks that normally our crew would. Since we're short-staffed, they've pitched in and taken on some of the workload."

"What about the thing that's following us? Tell me about it." Shifting so I sat in a more comfortable position, I gave my full attention to Mara.

"All we can tell from this distance using the scope is that it's a large creature—not the leviathan that helped us, but one that resembles a water dragon," Mara said. "At least based on what little we've seen from the surface. Jaron and Soryn will not shift again to take a closer look. They've maintained that they'll only shift as a last resort, to save a life.

"So, we're left to investigate from a distance. One thing I thought I saw but cannot confirm is that I thought I saw someone riding the creature. I couldn't tell exactly, but yesterday was a very clear day and when I looked through the scope, I thought I saw someone astride the water dragon."

Mara had moved from the bed to the windows at the far end of the room. As she said the last, she turned and glanced at each of us in turn. “Without getting closer, we won’t know for sure. The problem is, when we try to slow down, the creature slows down, too. At this point, I welcome the help if they are indeed here to ensure we get to port.” She nibbled on her lower lip as she said the last part, signaling to us all how worried this made Mara.

“Okay.” I moved to stand, and Leanne was right in my face.

“No, you need at least another two days’ rest, Don. You cannot get up and risk reopening that wound. It took me hours of surgery just to make sure you didn’t bleed out from the damage.”

“I need to show the crew that I’m going to be okay, Leanne.”

Just then, the door was torn off its hinges with a resounding roar and Lysander stormed into the room. Pointing a menacing finger at Leanne, he said, “Don’t ever drug me again.”

Leanne took a step back, but then held her ground. He looked disheveled and manic. “Lysander, you were no good to anyone in your state, you needed rest just as much as we all did.” She spoke in her best doctor’s voice, trying to let him know he didn’t intimidate her with his violence.

“Lysander, what the fuck do you think you’re doing barging in here, into my quarters, without my permission?” My voice decided at that moment to get all breathy, and not the strong and commanding one I was aiming for.

Taking his eyes off Leanne, he zeroed in on me, eyes blazing blue. I immediately wished I hadn’t spoken, but Leanne didn’t deserve his anger. “And you, you will not put yourself in harm’s way again.” He growled in rage, and my friends closed ranks to block his view of me. “Step aside.” His voice was almost unrecognizable, and my stomach fluttered—in desire or fear, and maybe a bit of both if I were honest with myself.

“Not until you calm down, Lysander.” Alexa’s voice remained steady, no emotion bleeding into it.

Looking at all my friends, I saw they were gearing up for a battle. He couldn’t shift due to his oath, but something told me that Lysander he was formidable in either shape and my friends would have more than they could handle if they fought.

It almost looked like he swelled in size, but then there was complete and utter silence. The tension was so thick, you could cut through it. For several moments, no one said a word, waiting for the other to act.

“Lysander, if you are able to contain your dragon for a bit, I will allow you to see her.” Leanne’s voice broke the tension. All eyes turning to her.

I was confused by Leanne’s comment. Why would his dragon be worked up?

While I tried to puzzle this out, Lysander quietly walked back to the door, lifted it off the ground and gently lifted what was left of the door against the wall. I could see his hands tremble slightly, confusing me even more. My friends hadn’t moved their positions, readiness emanating through their body language.

Leanne stood to the left by the washstand, watching Lysander carefully. He stood with his back to us, taking deep breaths, presumably to calm his dragon and regain control. Either way, he was trying to do as she asked.

Having had enough of this show, I intervened. “Leave us, girls.”

They all stiffened at the command. I knew what I would hear later, but there was something telling me I needed to speak to Lysander and understand what the hell was going on between us. As one, my friends turned with disbelieving expressions written on their faces.

“I’ll be fine. He won’t harm me. From what I hear, he sat vigilantly beside me the entire time I was out. If he wanted to harm me, he would have done so already.”

Still disapproving, they looked to me then each other and filed out. Left alone with this fearsome shifter, I almost regretted sending them away. Almost.

He turned after a while, grabbed the stool and sat down by the bed. He still wouldn't look at me, but I think it was because he was fighting some internal battle. When he finally did look up and made eye contact, what I saw made my breath hitch. I could see his eyes glowing softly, a brilliant blue bleeding through the midnight color.

“What’s happening, Lysander?” I hated that my voice shook as I said these words.

“My dragon has formed an attachment to you, I’m afraid. One that’s completely impossible given we are not of the same kind. I don’t understand it and I don’t know how I feel about it. But it doesn’t matter what I want or don’t want. In this, neither one of us has a choice in the matter.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Even though I had an inkling of where this was heading, my mind wouldn’t accept it.

“You are my true mate, Don. I don’t understand it, as I said, because you’re not a dragon shifter, and we only mate with our kind. There has never been a cross-species mating in our history. That is why you feel that connection and why I was able to trigger that vision in you before you left to get Giselle. When a dragon finds his mate, they are able to communicate through their souls, and when you were leaving my dragon feared it would lead to your demise so he triggered a deepening of the bond, which led to the vision.”

“Why would he want to deepen the bond?” Suspicion leaked through my question.

“If the bond is fully formed, mates can speak to each other, and trust is immediately established. His desire was that if he deepened the bond, your trust of him—and by extension me—would manifest and you’d become more open to listening to us. He didn’t factor in that you aren’t a dragon shifter and that deepening the bond would have unanticipated consequences.”



I recalled he'd said something before that sounded like he didn't want this. I didn't either, but somehow, him saying it out in the open tore a gash in my heart. Hissing, I pretended that my injury caused the discomfort.

He sprang into action at the sound. "You need to rest. I will get Leanne."

"No, not yet." I wanted to finish this conversation. "You're right that this is an unwanted bond. I don't need or want any attachment to anyone outside of my crew. What's to be done?"

He straightened his back but wouldn't look at me. "There are ways to break the bond, but it will require the help of a priest. The bond is too deep for either one of us to break through mere rejection."

"What I don't understand, Lysander, is if you don't want this, why didn't you reject the bond before now?" My voice sounded small in my ears. Hearing about breaking the bond was hurting something deep within me, but I pushed it aside.

"My dragon has to agree with severing the bond. There are different circumstances that could warrant a break of the bond, such as incompatibility between the mates. Sexual preference is another, or if one mate has already chosen another dragon as their life companion. Not all dragons find their mates. Most find love without it and marry. My dragon seems to be one of the few that has found its true mate..." His voice trailed off.

Looking at him, you wouldn't know that he was struggling with the situation, but then I noticed his hands were clenched tightly into fists that were bone-white. I would bet that when he opened his hands, he'd have crescent-shaped wounds from his nails digging into his palms. His shoulders were erect and his back as tight as a bowstring. Oh yes, he was definitely fighting an internal battle.

Not understanding any of this, I asked the question that I needed the answer to. "What happens to each of us once the bond is broken?"

"I'm not sure what will happen to you. But generally, breaking a bond requires one or both parties give up a portion

of their soul as payment. The gods don't take these things lightly. They see this as a gift and when it is rejected, the shifters must give something up in exchange. The few times I've seen it, the shifters went on to live normal lives, but had difficulty finding a partner. You see, there will always be a void that only a true mate can fill, making it difficult to find happiness with another. So, for dragons, you must be willing to live the rest of your life as a solitary creature."

"I see. I never intended to marry or live a normal family life. My life is the sea and my family is this crew. I don't want attachments of this kind, Lysander. I never did. I don't know you, either, which makes this even more awkward. How am I supposed to just accept that I must spend the rest of my life with someone I barely know? I didn't grow up believing that I'd find my soulmate and when it happened, it would be a done deal. I also never wanted to fall in love again. The one time I did, it destroyed me. I never want to experience anything like that again." A vulnerability I'd had no intention of sharing just spewed out of my mouth. Annoyed at myself, I clamped my jaw closed. Most people didn't know what really happened when I'd signed that contract, but he'd been around long enough to put the pieces together.

His eyes softened slightly at my comment. "I'm not unaware of what happened, Donyale. What I can tell you is that I am sympathetic and understand why you'd want to stay clear of attachments. My dragon wants this bond, but like I said, on this we are not in agreement."

Once again, his verbal rejection stabbed me in the heart. This was ridiculous—I barely fucking knew this shifter, and already I was reacting emotionally to his words. I scanned his beautiful face and took a deep breath. "It's settled then. When we arrive in Skolos, we will sever the bond. It seems your dragon is outnumbered this time." My lips curled in a small smile and his eyes tracked my movement, making his pupils dilate. Heat spread down to my core. Nostrils flaring, he sensed my arousal but immediately stood and walked to the open doorway.

“I will leave you to rest. I’ll be back later to fix the door. I apologize for the way I exploded in here. It will not happen again.” His back was to me the entire time he spoke. He left me alone, hot and bothered in all the right places and more confused than when I’d awoken. How did this shit happen?

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The tolling of the bells alerted us to our arrival at Amoralia. The city of bells they called it, and for good reason. The Kingdom of Methra was one of the few kingdoms that allowed for the worship of any religion. In the capital city alone, it was said that over a thousand temples existed, each serving a different god. How there could be that many gods? It was baffling, but many flocked here to avoid persecution in their own kingdom. There were no rules here as to which types of gods you could worship, and just as many temples dedicated to evil as good. Although they'd argue that good and evil were based on perception.

Amoralia was the kingdom's largest port city and boasted half as many temples, but it was overwhelming just the same. After weeks at sea with nothing but the sky, wind and water at your back, the noise was deafening. The night before I had relayed my commands to the crew. The relief on their faces was evident—they would be given paid time off once the ship's repairs were complete while my officers and I went on our pilgrimage to Skolos. At least, that's what we told them. We were all in need of processing the loss we experienced, and this time off would be about healing. I left Leila in charge in my absence and ensured every sailor understood that Leila's word was law on my ship. Anyone who disobeyed a direct order would be dismissed, or worse, be brought up on mutiny charges.

After communicating this, I looked closely at each crew member. They acknowledged my command and verbally agreed to follow Leila until my return. She had earned their

respect and they didn't resent her being chosen for this task. They were probably relieved it wasn't one of them. I was known to have the highest standards when it came to the care of my ship and crew. Leila's leadership would be tested, but looking at her, I felt confident she was ready for the job.

In the past week, we had laid our dead to rest and sent them to the underworld, to Elysium where they'd be celebrated as virtuous souls. We honored them as best we could as their bodies sank into a watery grave. I secretly prayed to Hades to help their souls find their way to him in peace. It was heartbreaking, yet therapeutic. Even the dragons attended the ceremony and paid their respects, with Lysander speaking words in a foreign and lyrical language that must have been the language of dragons, for as soon as he spoke those words, the skiff carrying our dead lit the night sky with the most beautiful blue fire.

It was curious that he had more than one elemental ability, but then again, we knew little about dragons, and there were rare cases where Fae were born with more than one ability. I was born with all five, though only one remained to me.

The crew watched solemnly as their friends departed this world forever. Off in the distance, a keening cry sounded. Our guardian, whoever it was, honored our dead as well. They had kept pace with us, following at just the right distance to stay somewhat inconspicuous, but close enough that if they needed to reach us quickly, they could. It was puzzling, this creature and its rider. For days my crew had tried to figure out their purpose, to no avail. Now they were a common fixture on our journey, tagging along behind us but not engaging any further. Eventually, the crew's interest wore off and they focused on getting us to port.

The ship was in bad shape. It would take weeks to fix her up, and Leila had her hands full with that alone. She would also make sure we had supplies and provisions for our next voyage, which seemed questionable given we had no idea how long we needed to stay in Skolos. The day we docked was clearer than most days had been previously. The air seemed cleaner, too.

I'd heard stories that Methra was one of the few kingdoms that believed in using machines to help clean the air. I'd never seen one but had met plenty of people who had and they commented in wonder at the ingenious way the king had invested in the safety of his people. The machines were located in every major city, concentrated where the largest populations were in the kingdom. According to Lysander, the machines were only addressing a symptom of the portal's opening and wouldn't save anyone in the long run. The citizens of Methra were healthier than others, but eventually, they would fall to the same toxins that those otherworldly creatures were emitting, weakening us for an easier conquest. The dragons didn't seem affected, and I said as much to Lysander; he in turn didn't respond.

Alexa stepped in beside me. "It's time, Don. We're ready to dock. The crew is preparing to go ashore and begin the repairs process. The dragons said they will go ashore and gather provisions for our trip. They advised that we also go into the city and purchase appropriate clothing for our trip. Apparently, Skolos is so vast that we will need clothes for every season. Lysander gave me a list of clothiers to go to that will be familiar with what we'll need."

Just hearing his name sent tingles throughout my body. Not liking how my body betrayed me every time I thought or even heard of him, I nodded sharply. "I assume Leanne will take Solara or Mara with her to gather medical supplies once we secure what we need in apparel?" My voice felt tight with anxiety. Not sure where the nervousness was coming from, I took a deep breath and centered myself.

"Yes, she has her list of supplies and then some. You know Leanne, always overpreparing. Come on, we need to go before you combust in front of the crew."

"What are you talking about?"

"Everyone's tired of walking on eggshells around Lysander and you. He's been an ornery asshole and you've been acting like a she-troll who's had her cock taken away from her... absolutely murderous. We all feel the sexual tension between

you two and I wish you'd just fuck his brains out so we can all relax.”

Humor tinted her words, but I didn't find anything funny about the situation. She knew what Lysander had shared with me—all of them, my entire crew, knew! “Fuck you, Al. You know why I must stay away from him.”

“Not my style, but maybe we can find you someone else to scratch that itch in town. Then maybe you'll be more yourself on this trip.” Not intimidated by my frustrated anger in the least, she smirked and sauntered off. She could be such a bitch sometimes, laughing at my expense when she knew it was a sore subject for me. But she did have a point. We weren't scheduled to leave for another couple of days. It could be good to release some of this tension at one of the pleasure houses. After all, that's what they were for, right?

“Alexa!” My shout rang out, stopping her in her tracks. Turning her head slightly, she waited for me to catch up. “You know, I think you have a great idea.”

“My ideas are *all* great.” Playful arrogance dripped from her tone.

Laughing, I looped my arm around her waist. She was too tall for me to wrap it around her shoulders. “Let's get the shit we need and then have some fun. We should all blow off a little steam.”

“I want to blow something, that's for sure. Not having any action in weeks and listening to you two rutting like animals has been burned into my memory, replaying over and over at the most inappropriate times. I'm just as keyed up as you.”

“What are you two plotting?” Solara and Mara caught up to us, followed by Leanne.

“We're planning out our evening. Once we gather what supplies and provisions we need, we're having a girls' night out.” Grinning like a maniac, Alexa's eyes sparkled in anticipation. “Get ready to release all that pent-up frustration and tension, ladies. We'll be spending some hard-earned coin tonight on some very skilled courtesans. I hear that Madame

Pauline's is the place to go if we're looking for the best sexual experience of our lives."

"How in the hell did you hear that? We've been at sea for several weeks, and before that we were dealing with the witch and her fucking sister." Suspicion bled through Mara's voice.

"I have my ways, and I never reveal my sources. Come on, my cunny wants to have some funny, and I suspect yours is starting to dry up given your current expression. It's practically a medical emergency at this point, am I right, Leanne?"

Blushing to her roots, Leanne pursed her lips in embarrassment.

Enjoying her new target, Alexa continued, "Leanne, when was the last time you got any?"

"Well, it's been a while," Leanne responded, surprising us all. She was usually very guarded around us. Maybe she was starting to open up? "I could use a little pick-me-up or three..."

My jaw dropped in shock. What did I just hear come out of Leanne's mouth?

Solara and Mara had a similar look on their faces, but Alexa reached over and threw her arm around Leanne. "Now, *you're* my kind of girl. Three, huh? Who knew you had it in you? Pun intended."

Laughter bubbled up and burst from my lips. Yes, we needed to let loose and tonight I'd get rid of this constant ache between my thighs. I'd been swollen with need since Lysander and I had had our one sexual encounter, my body primed 24/7, which was annoying as hell. But tonight, I'd relieve that need over and over again. Smiling freely now, we met with the port authority and provided the necessary paperwork for clear admission into the Kingdom of Methra. On the way there, we passed by Lysander, Jaron and Soryn, who all stopped and stared at our group of smiling, laughing women. Briefly making eye contact with Lysander, I gave him a jaunty wave



and off-boarded ahead of my crew so I could send them on their way with a full bag of coin and words of encouragement.

Once done, I shifted my attention to the items we needed to collect. My gut tightening with anticipation, my thoughts turned to the tasks at hand, the promise and reward of release afterward a strong motivator. With single-minded focus, we methodically checked every item off the list and stowed the supplies back on the ship. It was time to have a little fun.

Madame Pauline's was located in the central district of Methra, surrounded by well-established merchant stores. It was the most well-respected brothel in the world; in fact, people who visited Methra took a tour of the place just to see its interior. We, however, were here to sample the wares. We had stopped to eat dinner and had a few drinks to start off the night, to take the edge off and relax. Catching up, laughing and just being with my family without the never-ending work demanding our attention was gratifying and restorative.

The entrance to Madame Pauline's was like the entrance to a palace of pleasure. The walls, floors, furniture and décor were gilded in gold, silver and deep burgundy. Chandeliers dangled from the ceiling like diamond clusters. The lobby was clean and if you didn't know any better, it resembled the entrance to an inn that only the uber-wealthy could afford. The establishment could have given off a gaudy, overwhelming ambiance; instead, you felt like you were entering a different world, a world of elegance and wealth with the promise of extreme pleasure.

Alexa checked us in, and an usher took us down a wide-arched hallway, again tastefully decorated like a waiting room. Drinks were brought in while we waited for our rooms to be prepared. I guess we arrived a little early, though that made sense given how eager we were to get laid.

Mara sipped her wine. "Seriously, I never imagined a brothel would look like the inside of a king's palace. This place is amazing. How much must she make to pay for all this?"

“It’s rumored that she’s wealthier than most nobles and even some royals,” Alexa said. “She opened the brothel as a very young woman and took other young men and women in off the streets. They became her employees, and she takes care of them. Ensures they are healthy, well fed, even helps them build their own wealth so they can retire comfortably. No one knows where she came from, but she chose to elevate those that had little-to-no options.” Alexa had great respect for anyone that helped others overcome adversity and hardship and turn them into a successful outcome.

“I heard she’s a siren,” Solara said softly, “and left Oceanis to start a new life because the god wanted her so badly, he tried to enslave her. She escaped with her sister’s help and ended up here. She refused to use her voice given it could draw Oceanis from his watery palace, so she chose another path, a difficult one.”

Mara joined in. “I heard she was one of Zeus’s paramours and he left her destitute once he was finished with her. In typical Zeus fashion, he used her and then left her to fend for herself.”

“We all heard something different about Madame Pauline. Only she knows the truth. I can’t imagine all the rumors do her business any harm. Most people would want to come here just to see her.” I said, excitement tinting my words.

Turning to me, Mara took another sip of wine. “I wonder if we will. See her, I mean.”

Quirking an eyebrow, I opened my mouth to respond when the door opened, and four slender young women entered. They were dressed beautifully, wearing the latest fashionable attire. Two were in elegant floor-length ball gowns of the sort you’d only find the nobility wearing; one was in a sequin-fitted suit that left her bare from neck to navel and only barely covered her breasts. The last was wearing an elaborate floor-length gown, but the fabric was almost transparent, covering only the necessary parts, leaving little to the imagination. All were gorgeous. They must have had Fae blood, for their features resembled them: high cheekbones, brilliant wide jewel-colored

eyes, full pouty lips, and their hair was in shades of blue, deep red, light lavender and pink. Yes, definitely Fae blood.

“If you follow us, we’ll escort you to your rooms.” The redhead in the tight black bare-chested ensemble spoke directly to me. I had never been interested in women, but as she looked at me my body flushed with desire. Damn, I really needed to get laid...

Taking each of us by the hand, they led us down several hallways, proving this place was massive and a maze to maneuver. Still, I paid attention to where we were going so if we needed to leave we could do so on our own. The woman walked next to me. Her hand was warm in mine. She was a few inches taller than me and built like a sex dream. Firm, perky and large breasts hid behind her top; a tapered waist spoke of a fit body. Her strong, toned, supple legs ended in black stiletto heels. Not sure why I was so turned on by her, I faced forward and let her guide me.

Looking back, all my friends were being escorted to their rooms. Solara and Leanne had adjoining rooms and Mara walked into a room opposite theirs. Each had a shit-eating grin on their face, excited to get the night started. We had agreed to stay for two nights. We didn’t know when we’d have an opportunity like this again, so we were taking full advantage of it.

My escort stopped, jerking my attention toward her. She made eye contact, and I couldn’t pull my gaze away. She had the most mesmerizing eyes I’d ever seen. They were dark pools of shimmering color, reminiscent of black opals. They sparkled like gems with blues, greens, golds and purples alternating in the low light. Smiling, she opened the door and led me in.

Finally released from her magnetic stare, I took in my surroundings. A bed large enough to fit four people dominated the space. Elegantly appointed, the room could have belonged to a noble of high rank. The furniture was delicate, with a table and two dining chairs situated by the window and two couches in front of a large marble fireplace. The floors were covered in thick area rugs, finely made and probably very expensive.

Hearing the door click shut, I turned in time to see my escort standing in front of it. Confused, I waited for her to explain why she remained inside the room. When she didn't speak but instead moved toward me, I took a small step back. "I expect my host will arrive soon, correct?"

Pausing, she smiled, and my stomach did a little flip. What the hell was going on with my body right now? "Yes, he will, but I will prepare you in advance of his arrival. We have a hot bath ready in the adjoining room. I'm to help you relax."

Her voice sent shivers down my spine, but I nodded and proceeded to the adjoining room. She followed sedately behind me.

The tub was massive and the fragrance that was coming from the bath lured me in. I started to undress, but felt my escort come up behind me and start helping me out of my clothes. Feeling a little nervous, I allowed her to take my clothes off. Her hands moved at a leisurely pace, not too slow and not too fast, efficient.

As each article of clothing came off, she started to explore my body with her nimble hands. At first, it was light touches here and there, nowhere near my aching core, but then it changed. She guided me into the bath and with gentle hands and proceeded to explore my body, mapping every curve as if to memory. She grabbed the fragrant soap and began to lather my body slowly and thoroughly.

She started with my arms, lathering them up individually. You'd think that would be the least sexy thing to experience, but my body was so amped up that any touch only strung me up tighter. Once done with each arm, she moved on to my feet, calves and then my thighs. Holding my breath, I waited to see if she would continue up my inner thighs, but she didn't. She stopped right before the apex and then, making eye contact with me, she moved to my chest. I wasn't small-breasted—in fact, she and I were probably of similar size—and her hands were not big enough to cup them fully, but she was masterful in her treatment of them. Her hands were soapy as they circled my nipples, massaging and caressing. When she finally paid attention to my nipples, I was so ready to come. Then she

dipped her head after rinsing my chest and gently sucked on my left nipple, nipping it slightly and drawing a moan from me.

This was absolute torture, but she continued in her ministrations. Her other hand continued to massage my right breast and nipple, pinching it slightly and causing my pussy to pulse almost painfully with need. She moved on to my right nipple, sucking hard and tweaking my left with her other hand. It felt so delicious that I wanted to keep her there forever, but my pussy had other ideas.

Feeling the pressure building, I moved my left hand to my folds, trying to satisfy the ache continuing to build there. I needed a release, and soon. Noticing where my hand had drifted to, she pulled up, lips even more full, wet and swollen from the attention she was giving my breasts. She leaned in and licked my lips, and I gasped in shock at the sensation. Taking it as an invitation, she pressed forward, licking the inside of my mouth gently. I closed my eyes and gave in to the sensations, returning her kiss fully. We were both breathing hard and almost ravishing each other when she pulled away.

Easing back, she never broke eye contact as she removed my hand from my pussy and replaced it with hers. She took her time, grabbing a fresh rag from the table next to her with her right hand while her left cupped me, placing the flat of her palm on my clit and rubbing it with enough pressure that it eased some of the ache, but not enough. She removed her hand, and I hissed in response, wanting her to continue. Looking up, she smiled that otherworldly smile again and began to wash my sex. The friction of the rag on my clit almost did the trick, but she knew what she was doing and, once clean, she stopped. What a tease!

She stood and moved behind me. I knew what she wanted, to wash my hair. Suppressing my desire was a monumental effort, but I complied with her wishes. “You know, for someone who is supposed to help me relax, you are doing the opposite.” My voice sounded loud in the room.

“Patience,” was all she said.

“Not my virtue. What’s your name?” Maybe a little conversation would help me get my head back in the game instead of my pussy doing all the thinking.

She didn’t say anything for a few moments. “I’m Rhiannon.” Something about the name called to me, but I figured it was only because of our recent interactions. Rhiannon sounded like sweet music when she spoke it.

Testing it out, I said, “Rhiannon, that’s a beautiful name.” She massaged my scalp, soaping up my hair. Her hands seemed to temper my need to orgasm a bit, going from a raging fire to a slow burn.

“Can you sit up? I need to rinse your hair.”

Doing as she asked, I felt the warm cascade of water run from the top of my head down my back. I was so sensitive that I could feel every rivulet of water as it made its journey to the bath water pooling in the middle of my back. With efficient movements, she finished rinsing my hair and stood to grab towels. She was still fully dressed, with only her sleeves rolled up. She walked like sex; it was unbelievable. Madame Pauline sure knew how to pick them and train them.

Coming back to me, she placed one towel on the table next to her and proceeded to dry my hair with the other, wrapping it around my hair when done. Next, she held out the other towel so I could step out of the tub and wrap it around me. Standing, with water running down every crevice and curve of my body, I lingered as she stared hungrily at me from the top of my head, down to my breasts, stopping right at the juncture of my thighs. My body, which had been on a slow burn, was now again a raging inferno. Stepping out, she proceeded to pat me dry, taking more time around my breasts, thighs and pussy, making me want to squirm and pull my thighs together to ease the need inside me.

Already dripping with desire and feeling a little overwhelmed by my body’s reaction to this woman, my mind stopped altogether when I felt her breath skim along my body; starting at my breasts, she licked and sucked and massaged for what seemed like forever, then dropped lower to my belly and

then even lower. She kneeled in front of me, grabbing each of my thighs in a firm grip, and began massaging firmly, going from the outside to the inside of my thighs, hands firm, loosening my tight muscles. I widened my stance slightly, wanting her to move up and touch my throbbing pussy. As if she could read my mind, she accepted the invitation I was providing.

Feeling her palm cup my core, I almost came apart then—but she was only getting started. Opening my eyes, I looked down at her deep-red hair as it came closer to my center. She was still fully dressed, and I was bare as the day I was born. It was erotic and made me so hot that I grabbed her head and pushed it toward my pussy. Seeing that I was ready to accept the pleasure she'd so expertly ignited, she leaned in and licked my folds with the flat of her tongue, drinking in my essence and then coming back for more. Her tongue delved deep, hitting all the right spots. I kept a hand firmly on her head, grabbing a fistful of hair, showing her what I wanted.

Her tongue was like magic, vibrating rapidly inside of me, pushing me closer to coming. Chasing it, I started to grind into her face. Sensing my need, she redoubled her efforts, rubbing my clit with one of her palms, angling her face so her tongue could get better access to my pussy. My fist in her hair keeping her in the position I wanted, I moved my hips furiously, trying to get to that orgasm that was just out of reach. Then I felt her tongue thicken and lengthen in my pussy and vibrate even harder and faster, and I came so hard I saw stars. I could feel wetness dripping down my leg, from me or her, it didn't matter. I was still riding a wave of ecstasy as she kept licking and sucking, trying to drink everything my pussy had to give.

Looking up at me, I was immediately turned on again by seeing her beautiful opal eyes full of desire and my juices running down her chin. Pulling her up, I kissed her hard, tasting myself in the process. I couldn't believe it—I was ready for round two. I gripped her top and pulled it off her in my eagerness to have her as naked as I was. I heard the fabric rip but didn't stop kissing her, our tongues flirting and tasting each other in the process. She was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. I ran my hands up her back and around

her shoulders, reaching for her full breasts that were touching mine. I palmed one, testing its weight; all the while she was still exploring my pussy, fingers sliding inside, making me moan into her mouth.

Pulling back, I looked at her. She was bare from the waist up, her skin lighter than mine. Where I was a dusky olive tone, she was golden, warmth radiating from her skin, hair and eyes. I felt my chest constrict; I needed more. Moving forward again, I bent down and tentatively licked her left nipple, bringing it into my mouth, exploring the feel of her hardened flesh. I sucked it softly at first, but when she grabbed the back of my head, telling me what she wanted, I sucked on it hard, and it pebbled in my mouth. The sensation was different yet pleasant, and she seemed so sensitive to it that I renewed my efforts, grabbing the other nipple between my forefinger and thumb and rolling it while giving her left one my full attention. Rhiannon's husky voice disrupted my focus, "Let's go to the other room, I want to put my mouth on you again." Shifting my attention to the other nipple, I drew it into my mouth, hearing her moan with pleasure. Her fingers were furiously pumping in and out of me, amplifying my need to orgasm again. I tightened my thighs around her hand, bringing her palm once again flush against my clit. I shamelessly rubbed my pelvis into her palm looking for that delicious friction that would take me over the edge.

I reluctantly stepped back, the sound of her nipple popping out of my mouth was the only noise in the room. Grabbing her hand, we practically sprinted for the large four-poster bed, the towel on my head falling by the wayside and my dark hair wetly flowing down my back. She urged me to get on the bed, but I turned instead and went down on my knees. She still had her leggings on and I wanted to see her fully. I grabbed the waistband and worked the clothing down her hips, her buttocks and then down her toned legs. I helped her remove her shoes and pulled off the offending material from her.

She was breathtaking. Golden, shimmering skin covered her from head to toe. Large perky breasts that made my mouth water followed a flawless face. She had a narrow waist that had not an inch of fat to show followed by the flare of her



hips. My eyes widened at the fact that she had no hair covering her sex. I could hear her chuckle at my surprise. “I don’t grow any, if that’s what you want to know. Now, where were we?”

Stepping forward, she took the lead. Grabbing my hair in a rough, tight grip, she pulled me toward her and licked my neck down to my tips of my breasts. She teased my nipples, biting gently—nipping almost—licking each, then returned to my mouth, giving me a fierce kiss that felt like a branding. It burned its way to my core, which was all too eager for more.

She stepped onto the bed without pausing our kiss and pulled me along with her. I crawled after her, waiting for direction. She angled her face away and I sucked in air, her kiss having robbed me of my oxygen for a second. Her lips were swollen as I’m sure mine were. “We will both get our pleasure this time.” She smiled and her face transformed again. It was like the sun peeking through the clouds on a cold winter day and warming your body to its marrow. She lay down. “Come, put your wet pussy on my mouth. I want you to ride me.”

I was a little nervous about this. I’d had oral sex plenty of times, but never with a woman. She licked her lips then and I could feel a gush of wetness respond to the act. I crawled over to her and straddled her face. “No, the other way: I want access to your ass, too. I want you to eat me out as well. I want to come all over your mouth and face.”

Her words stoked a fire within me. Shifting my position, I faced her feet and straddled her again. I could feel my juices already running down my leg. Who knew I would be so eager to fuck this woman?

She grabbed onto my thighs and firmly brought my sex to her waiting and eager tongue, and I groaned at the sensation. She licked and sucked and used her fingers to pinch my clit, bringing me closer to climax. I started riding her like she asked, leaning forward to get the right friction going. My eyes closed, I immersed myself in the sensations, her hot eager tongue drawing out so much pleasure, somehow hitting that one spot that sent rippling shocks of mini orgasms throughout. Moaning and gyrating in rhythm with her tongue, I opened my

eyes and noticed that her pussy was right in front of my face, ready to be tasted.

Gripping the back of her thighs, I dove right in. I didn't know what I was doing, so I followed her lead. With the flat of my tongue, I licked her front to back, surprised at how delicious she tasted, like fresh honey-dipped berries. She jerked in surprise, and I knew she liked it from the moaning vibration that sent me ever closer to a climax. Feeling the urgency of my own need, I wanted to bring her with me. She tasted like heaven, and I had no problem eating her out like it was my last meal. I swirled my tongue around her clit and sucked on it hard, bringing a little pain with the pleasure. She moaned loudly, telling me she enjoyed it. I opened her folds and licked every drop of wetness that had accumulated there, and then focused on her core. She was dripping, so horny that her pussy looked swollen with need.

Her hips lifted, telling me I needed to give her more, so I did. My lips latched on to her core and my tongue delved deep within, swirling, spearing, sucking, drinking more and more, and yet not enough. I suddenly felt a wet thumb pushing into my ass, and my heat pounded with the need to release. I focused on rubbing her clit as I ate her out, increasing the friction that would bring her with me. Her hips started jerking in response, faster and faster. I kept the pressure up while I tried to concentrate on giving her pussy the kind of attention she'd given me.

I was a moaning, grinding mess, so ready to come, but I wanted to give her the same thing she was giving me. We were rolling on the bed now, each trying to get more leverage to increase the friction. Then, I slipped two fingers into her tight pussy and she in turn slipped her thumb back in my ass, moving it in sync with her tongue, which started to lengthen and thicken in my pussy. Not to be outdone, I used my air element and sent tendrils of it to swirl around her body, caressing, pinching and then focusing on her breasts. I used air to mimic my mouth, sucking hard and relentlessly to bring her to climax.

The combination of her tongue and thumb, our frantic hip movements and my magic almost sent us over the edge. Then her tongue thickened even more and hit that one spot so hard I felt my body start to explode. It vibrated and my core ignited. Sucking on her pussy so hard and using all the concentration I could muster, I sent another tendril of air to her ass and put pressure on it, attacking her body's sensitivities, just as she was doing with me. With three of my fingers in her pussy pumping away, my tongue firmly on her clit sucking and nipping and my air tendrils doing the rest, we orgasmed together, an explosion of energy that had us riding the climax for what felt like days. Her pussy was gushing with delicious juices, just as mine was, and we couldn't get enough of each other, lapping it up like we were starved. All the while moaning in ecstasy because our bodies were riding the highest waves of pleasure imaginable.

Finally spent, we collapsed on the bed. I could still taste her and wanted more, which was crazy. She rolled off the bed and walked into the adjoining bathroom. I watched her and realized that she had intricate tattoos across the entirety of her back. Lifting up on one arm, I tried to make out the design. But my eyes kept dropping to her firm, full ass. She walked like a predator. She disappeared for a moment, and I heard water splashing. She returned with a small towel and a brush. She pushed me back down and proceeded to thoroughly clean my entire body and face. The room smelled like sex, and she looked like a sex goddess. I could feel my body getting warm, wanting to go again. She could sense it and smiled. But she had me sit up and gently brushed my hair.

"If we don't brush it now, it may become horribly tangled by the time the night is done." Her voice slid over me like honey, mesmerizing and arousing.

Just then, a knock sounded. She glanced at me, and her smile widened. "Now the real fun begins." Confused, I wasn't sure what she meant and watched her open the door. On the other side stood a gorgeous male specimen. He exuded sex. By the look of him, he was Fae as well. He was much taller than Rhiannon, towering over her, but he wasn't intimidating; he looked and walked like a sex dream. He stepped in, took in the

two of us slowly, appreciatively, and strode toward the bed. Rhiannon followed.

He wasn't wearing much, just a light silk shirt open down to his navel, and loose pantaloons that were designed for ease of movement in the heat. He had light hair, brown with streaks of gold, and hazel eyes that shifted from green to gold depending on the light. He stopped and Rhiannon stepped up behind him, her hands coming around his torso to lift the shirt off of him. I watched as she stripped him of his clothing, slow, seductive and hot as fuck. I was wet again just watching her undress him and touch him. She knelt in front of him, angled so that I could watch. She took him into her mouth and started sucking him hard. I could see the hollows of her cheeks as he punished her mouth with his cock. I started reaching down and working my pussy again, rubbing my clit to ease some of the renewed pressure, but it only intensified.

All you could hear was his grunts of pleasure and the wet sucking sounds she made. Her beautiful mouth accommodated his size, which was significant. Madame Pauline didn't hire small-dicked men, that was for sure. He had girth and length, and my body was ready to take it all.

Rhiannon pulled back with a loud popping sound. The entire time, the male had not touched her; she had initiated contact at every turn. She rose up and faced me, never looking at him. She was solely interested in my reactions. I was so hot and wet that I nodded my head, ready for this next little adventure. She walked over to me, crawled onto the bed and hovered over me. She greedily looked me over from head to toe and I could tell she wanted to eat me out again. My pussy was getting wet just thinking about our last orgasm.

Her whispered voice caressed my face. "I want him to fuck you while you and I eat each other out." Not sure how that was going to work, I frowned. "He'll fuck you in the ass while you and I take our pleasure from each other, just like we did earlier."

Just hearing those words sent heat spearing through me. I had never been ass-fucked, but it sounded like a I ride I wanted to take, especially when Rhiannon was there with me.

“Yes,” I whispered, so ready that my pussy was dripping down over my ass and onto the bedsheets.

“But we first have to make sure you’re ready, so he’ll fuck your pussy while you pleasure me.” Grabbing me by my arms, she helped me sit up and positioned me on all fours. The male climbed onto the bed behind me, and Rhiannon lay back against the pillows, legs splayed wide with her swollen pussy calling to me. She placed a pillow under her hips to give me a better angle to work with, clever minx.

I crawled forward, eager to taste her again. “Make sure to fuck her hard.” Her instructions rang out as I felt the blunt head of his cock at my entrance. He lined himself up, but before he entered me, he wiped my pussy with his hand, front to back, creating amazing friction in the process. His hand was soaking wet when he smeared that wetness all over my ass, prepping it for what would happen next.

Staying on all fours, I leaned down onto my elbows, elevating my ass while bringing my mouth to that sweet, honeyed taste I couldn’t seem to get enough of. Gripping her thighs roughly and looking at her as I placed my mouth on her, she moaned delightfully. I wasn’t gentle. I sucked and bit her clit and felt the gush of wetness coming from her pussy; she loved it.

Then I felt the male behind me enter my wet folds and I nearly exploded again—but then a roar ripped through the air and the door exploded into a million splinters. Startled, we jumped apart.

Standing in the doorway, chest heaving and eyes blazing, was none other than my so-called true mate.

He moved so fast we couldn’t get our bearings, grabbing the male Fae by the throat and lifting him several feet off the floor. “Who the fuck are *you*?” He didn’t even sound like Lysander, which meant the dragon was riding him hard.

Rhiannon was up before I was and shielding me from Lysander. His glowing cobalt eyes shifted to her and there was almost recognition in his expression before it hardened, and he

shook the male like a rag doll. “Who are you, and what are you doing with my mate?”

Gasping sounds came from the male attempting to answer Lysander’s question. He wasn’t small, but Lysander made him look almost petite in his rage. Rhiannon was doing her best to block my view, but Lysander walked around the bed, still holding the poor male by the throat as if he weighed nothing. Searing me with his glowing azure eyes, he stepped right up to the bed and inhaled deeply. The growl that emanated from him was pure dragon and it sent shivers of dread down my spine.

“Do you know what happens to males that touch another’s mate?” His voice was the calm before the maelstrom. Never taking his eyes off me, a swirl of water streamed out of the bathroom, wrapping itself around the male Fae, spinning round and round, keeping his lips from moving—and finally, it encased his head, covering his nose and mouth, effectively preventing him from getting any air. Lysander was breathing heavily, trembling with rage while standing between me and the male suspended in the air with water.

Snapping out of my dazed stupor, I jumped off the bed and stormed up to Lysander. Craning my head back to make eye contact, I glared at him. “Let him go! He was only doing his job. And why the hell would you care who I fuck? We agreed that we were going to sever the bond as soon as we possibly can.” My voice shook with anger—or was it fear, or pain?—and I quickly flickered my gaze to the male. He was struggling to breathe.

“You belong to me, and me to you.” The voice coming from Lysander was not Lysander’s, and there was pain in the words he spoke. Ripping my gaze back to his face, I noticed two things: His eyes were a brilliant blue with black slits for pupils, and they blazed a trail across my eyes, cheeks, nose and mouth. It was possessive and coveting. The second was that a blue shimmer projected off his body.

Confused by his response and his presence, I took a step back. “I hired him, Lysander. Let him go.”

“I can smell him on you, as well as that other one.” Raising a hand, he pointed to Rhiannon, who hadn’t moved from her position on the other side of the bed. She didn’t show fear, though. If anything, she looked impressed. I mean, what the fuck?

“It doesn’t matter. We agreed to sever the bond, and that means we’re free to pursue our own paths and fuck whomever we want.” Saying it made my heart ache, which only made me angrier.

“The dim-witted male agreed to that; I did not.” The words were almost unintelligible, and I now truly understood that I was speaking to the dragon, not Lysander.

“He was only doing what I paid him to do. Let him go.” I softened my voice. “We are not mates. At least we won’t be once we reach Skolos.”

“He dies for touching you. There is no other way.” I looked at the male encased in water. He was drowning slowly, Lysander allowing him air through small openings and then closing them up quickly. It was torture, and I was beginning to panic. I looked to Rhiannon for help, but she very calmly wrapped a robe around herself and crossed her arms over her chest. Seriously, what the fuck was the matter with everyone?

Lysander moved faster than I could track and pierced the water with his right hand, punching the male in the chest, and water sprayed everywhere. He was on him in an instant, beating him black and blue. The male tried to defend himself, but his efforts were ineffectual at best. I tried to pull Lysander off of him, but it was like trying to move a mountain. He just kept punching the poor male, who was by then bloodied and unconscious.

“What the hell is going on here!” A woman’s voice penetrated the tension in the room, freezing everyone mid-motion. Glancing around, she zeroed in on the Fae male who was slowly and brutally being killed by Lysander.

“Get off him. Now.” She was tall, fit and probably one of the most beautiful people I’d ever seen. She looked like a golden lioness and her presence was immediately felt. She was

ready to tear us to pieces. Her aura was like nothing I'd seen or felt before. Switching to my magical sight, she almost blinded me. I averted my gaze and looked at Lysander with the same sight; he blazed blue, a counterpoint to her gold. *If I don't stop Lysander, there will be bloodshed—and I'm not convinced it will be this woman's. Something tells me she's more powerful than anything we've faced up until now.* Closing my eyes, I tried a different tactic.

“Lysander, please. He didn't know. If you want to punish anyone, punish me. He's innocent in all this.”

Taking his eyes off the woman, he pinned me with his dragon eyes. It took an agonizing amount of time for him to decide whether to listen to me. Fearing that he wouldn't, I stepped closer to him and placed my hand on his jaw. His eyes closed, almost like he was in pain, and when he opened them, he released the male and stood up. Several people rushed in and carried the Fae male out. The woman didn't depart but instead strode into the room, gearing up for battle. I could feel her gathering her magic, a pull in the atmosphere that told me we were in trouble.

“Who are you?” Confused, I looked at her and noticed she was staring at Rhiannon. Confused, I looked at Rhiannon, too. Lysander, though, didn't move or look away from my face.

“She's another one.” Startled by his voice, which sounded decidedly more like Lysander, I snapped my gaze back to his face. He wore a neutral expression, and I couldn't tell what he was thinking, but his eyes still hadn't left my face. Somehow, his gaze made sadness spread across my chest.

“She's another *what?*” the woman's voice whipped out.

“Mate.” He said the word as I was staring into his eyes; in them I saw a strange flash of emotion, then it was gone.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

**A**nother mate? I don't know what the hell is going on here, but you have exactly ten minutes to grab your shit and get the fuck out. No one assaults my employees without repercussions. You're lucky he's still alive, otherwise you'd already be dead."

So, this was Madame Pauline. My eyes widened at the realization of what Lysander had just said about Rhiannon, but I pushed past him to speak to the establishment owner.

"I apologize for the disruption and will pay for all your employee's medical expenses and pay double the fee agreed to for his services. I never intended for this to happen." I pitched my voice so she could hear my sincerity. I mean, I'd just wanted a good lay and then the dragon had to show up and throw this mate shit around. And what the fuck was this about Rhiannon?

Lysander followed behind me, standing so close that his heat blanketed my bare body, making me shiver for reasons other than the room's coolness. I stood a few feet from Madame Pauline and waited in silence as she studied me.

"What is your name?"

"I am Donyale, Captain of the *Miscreant*." Even though I was naked and almost a foot shorter than her, I straightened to my full height as I shared my name and title.

"Rhodes's daughter."

Shock ripped through me at the mention of my mother. "You know my mother?" I spoke in a whisper of a sound, but

she heard me clearly.

“You look like her—your features, I mean. Though your coloring is more like Poseidon. But yes, I know her. She and I were good friends once, a long time ago. There aren’t many I don’t know in this world.” Her gaze softened slightly as she said this.

There was a long pause where no one broke the silence.

She came to some conclusion and gave me a brief nod. “It looks like you have things to work through with these two. You will pay *double* the fee for the injuries sustained by my employee and *triple* the normal fee for the room and services rendered. If you agree, then you may stay the rest of the night. Again, you are lucky he was still alive when I arrived. Otherwise, none of you would have left this establishment intact. I don’t take kindly to anyone abusing my employees.” Her eyes hardened and flicked to Lysander, who stood so close behind me that I felt the fabric of his clothes grazing my backside.

“Agreed.” Voice shaking in trepidation at what would happen next, I nodded.

Her eyes landed on my face again. “Come see me before you leave. There is something that I’ve been holding on to that belongs to you.”

Confused, I nodded my head once in agreement.

Satisfied, she glanced sternly once more at Lysander and then Rhiannon, who had somehow found a robe to wrap around herself during the confrontation with Madame Pauline. She departed with a soft click of the door, leaving me with what was now two mates to contend with.

Searching for something to cover myself with, I went to the bathroom and grabbed another robe.

Lysander was still standing in the same spot when I returned dressed. Rhiannon hadn’t moved either. I was still processing what had happened and said nothing. I remained standing in the open doorway to the bathroom.

“I can explain.” Rhiannon’s voice rang throughout the room.

I hardened my voice. “Please do.”

“I’ve been following you since the pirate attack. I was sent by Queen Rhodes to help you, but I didn’t know that I was your mate. I didn’t intend for all this to happen. I snuck into Madame Pauline’s and paid the escorts for their silence. I’d only planned to show you to your room and then find you tomorrow morning to explain my mission. The rest just happened as part of the mate bond. I felt compelled to seal the bond with you.” Her voice was so musical. It did something to me, relaxing me in ways I hadn’t experienced before. Where Lysander spiked my adrenaline like no other, she calmed me down.

I shook off the feeling of comfort that she provided. I needed answers. “Why would my mother send you? You aren’t of the sea.”

“I was sent as part of a delegation to your home and there met Queen Rhodes. She gave me this mission without explaining why. She asked that I find you and protect you. She had spoken to an Oracle that gave her a glimpse of what you would face, and she feared for your life.”

“Why you? What’s so special about you that she’d ask you to come save me?” I said this almost cruelly. I was beyond angry.

Silence greeted my question. I waited, though. I wasn’t going to let her bypass me in this. If she was telling the truth, then she would reveal the reason behind her actions.

Looking first at Lysander and then me, she wet her lips, shooting warmth through my core. Confused and aroused, I gave myself a mental shake to focus. After what felt like an agonizing amount of time, she opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Grimacing at her reluctance to share, I walked over to the decanter and poured myself a glass of amber liquid.

Clearing her throat just as I took my first sip of the fiery drink, I turned again to face her with what I hoped was a bored expression. “I have the ability to use the spirit element.”

I nearly dropped the glass I was holding. Spirit elementals were extremely rare, and most were reclusive given their ability to rip people’s souls from their bodies. They also had the ability to call spirits from the underworld as a means of protection. Most were shunned because of their abilities, and yet, here she was, looking like nothing I would expect a spirit elemental to look like.

“I’m also a shapeshifter,” she added quietly. Shapeshifters were almost nonexistent. They could shift into any sentient being and had incredible control over their shifting abilities, more so than any other shifter known.

“Where are you from?” Lysander’s voice startled me.

“I come from Kryia, from a small remote village almost exclusively populated by shapeshifters. We are one of the last surviving tribes.” She spoke proudly of this. I couldn’t blame her; shapeshifters had been feared and hunted for centuries.

“Why didn’t you just reveal who you were earlier?” My voice shook with anger.

“I was going to, but then I didn’t expect the bond to take over. I had no idea that we were mates. I thought my mission was to be added protection. The queen—I mean your mother—didn’t reveal anything other than to act with urgency to ensure your safety. I am one of the best archers in Kryia and I have mastered control over my power, making me a strong ally and asset to you. I swear that’s all I thought I was signing up for,” she said fervently.

“But why would you take on this mission? You aren’t of my mother’s people, nor do you know who I am.” Talking about my mother hurt, but I had to know.

“Honestly, I don’t know. When she asked me, I felt a sense of rightness, of purpose in being part of this mission. It felt like I was meant to be here, with you.” She stopped abruptly, probably realizing how everything sounded.

I turned to Lysander, and he faced the bay window, hands fisted and tense as hell. “What do you say about all of this, Lysander?” My voice shook slightly. I was still trying to work through his reaction to my little sexcapade.

“You need to get *his* scent off of you if you want me to be remotely rational.” He growled, which only did a number on my libido. Scowling, I took a step toward him, but he whipped his head toward me and I understood why he had positioned himself so far from me. His dragon was close to the surface, his eyes betraying his presence.

“I’m trying to regain control, but with you near and smelling like another male, my dragon is barely leashed. For once I agree with him: I should have killed that cretin when I got here. That man was lucky you’re very convincing when you want to be. But if you come any closer, I can’t guarantee my control won’t slip and we’ll spend the next few hours wiping that stench off of you. So, if you want to *talk*, you need to wash that smell off of you.” He hissed when he said “talk,” telling me he wanted anything but that. I had read once that mates who caught a whiff of another’s scent on their mates could go on a murderous rampage. Now I understood what that meant. Apparently, Lysander holding the dragon back took incredible control.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. Rhiannon was heading to the bathroom. I stopped her in her tracks. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to put my clothes back on and give you two some space.” She turned fully to me as she spoke.

“Wait, why aren’t you pissed off that Rhiannon and I just had sex?” I flipped to Lysander, who hadn’t moved an inch but seemed to tense up even more at my question.

“She’s one of your mates and that’s the only thing that keeps her safe. My dragon will not harm another one of your mates. We don’t like to share, but the bond is sacred, and anything that comes between the bonded will result in violence and even death,” he said through gritted teeth.

Realizing that he was hanging on by a thread, I nodded and walked swiftly into the bathroom, passing Rhiannon as I went. “Rhiannon, you may dress, but you aren’t going anywhere. We need to work through this and figure out what we will do... together.”

She glanced back at Lysander, who only stared intensely at me, jaw muscles moving under his skin, clearly fighting to maintain control. “As you wish. I will ask that the sheets be changed, and the room aired out in the meantime. I believe your dragon is riding a killing edge right now, and we don’t want him to lose control and hunt that male down after all.” She caught my eyes with her own beautiful opal-black orbs, smiling slightly.

My heart gave a little jump at the motion, but I didn’t return the smile. I was angry that everyone had kept so much from me, and that included her.

Nodding, I preceded her into the bathroom and started to run a hot bath. She dressed quickly and left me alone. Lysander didn’t venture close to the bathroom at all, which didn’t surprise me. He was fighting to keep the dragon under control, but he also didn’t want anything to do with me, which sent a spear of sharp pain through my chest, catching me by surprise.

This made no fucking sense. I didn’t want a mate, much less two. What the hell was happening? This was surreal and my head couldn’t process it. I stepped into the steaming tub, making sure to use the lavender scents and soaps to wash up. The heat helped to ease the tension out of my muscles. You’d think after the last two hours my body would be relaxed, and it was, or at least had been before Lysander burst into the room and once again changed what I knew about myself.

There was the sound of the door opening followed by a rustling in the other room. It must be the cleaning crew. Closing my eyes in frustration about how my life was continually turned upside down, I dipped lower into the tub. I heard a loud, menacing growl that sent shivers of delight down my spine and snapped my head toward the doorway. I saw a terrified female servant facing the bedroom, their back to me.

“There is no need for you to go in there.” His voice was practically unrecognizable, but I understood.

The servant nodded her head. “Sir, I was just going to straighten up. I didn’t know the mistress was in here. I will leave now.” She rushed out of sight, and I heard the door click closed.

“You should have revealed yourself to me, shapeshifter.” Lysander’s dragon had reemerged and was speaking with Rhiannon.

“Why should I have done that? You didn’t seem interested in completing the bond. I could see it was halfway formed and fraying at that. What keeps you from her?” Her voice was strong, unafraid.

“That is none of your concern. What you should worry about is whether I think your reasons for staying hidden are valid. I find it strange that you tail us and then show up here, in disguise, to get close to Donyale. Why? Why didn’t you just approach her as we docked at port?” I could sense that he was circling her, stalking his prey in a sense, trying to intimidate her.

“If you’re trying to scare me, dragon, you should know that I don’t scare easily. My reasons are my own and only Donyale has the right to ask. I owe you nothing, even if we share a mate. You have rejected her, and so I reject you as a mate-brother.” Her voice was strong and firm, without an ounce of fear.

Closing my eyes, I finished cleaning every inch of myself for probably the fourth time. I wanted to make sure there was nothing left of the Fae male’s scent on me to distract Lysander. Sloshing water out of the tub as I stepped out, I quickly dried myself as dead silence filled the other room. Sighing, I covered myself up in a thick plush robe and towel-dried my hair. Not nearly ready to face what lay beyond the bathroom, I stood and forced my feet to move.

They stood on opposite sides of the room, unmoving, staring at each other in what seemed like a standoff. I stepped into the room, and they turned to look at me simultaneously.

Feeling unnerved by their single-minded attention, I once again made my way to the small bar in the room and poured myself a stiff drink. Taking a seat, I steeled myself for the next conversation.

“I want to know everything that you know about mate bonds. I’ve never heard of someone having multiple mates, but then, I’m no shifter, so my education is spotty at best.” I was proud that my voice was steady and firm.

Lysander slowly made his way across the room, and I felt a pinpoint of pain in my chest when he chose the chair farthest from me to sit. Hiding my grimace behind the glass, I saw Rhiannon take the chair adjacent to me.

Her voice took on an educational tone. “Mate bonds can be simple, a one-to-one bonding of souls. While it’s rare to have more than one bond, it has happened during times of strife. Historically, there have been a handful of multiple-to-one connections—call it ‘multi-mate bonds’—usually with the purpose of strengthening the bond group to protect against the darkness.”

Lysander remained eerily silent, letting Rhiannon share her knowledge. “The central bond mate is usually someone who is exceptionally strong in elemental magic, so strong in fact that they are unable to manage their power on their own. They need multiple bonds to balance out their power. If one or more of the bonds fractures or isn’t fully formed, control of their abilities can be compromised.” At this she stared directly at Lysander, challenging his decision to sever the bond.

Snarling, he responded to her challenge. “There hasn’t been a situation where a single Fae bonds with multiple mates in a millennium. What you share is all based on heresy, stories passed down and diluted from actual events. There is no evidence that points to loss of control if one or more mate bonds aren’t formed or are severed.”

Every word he said sent spears of pain through my heart. Hardening myself against the hurt, I willed my mind to overrule my heart or whatever appendage was wreaking havoc on my emotions. Blinking back unshed tears, I stood and



walked over to the same bay window he'd positioned himself near when trying to regain control of his dragon. I did so to hide the emotions flitting across my face. I didn't want him to see how much his words and the disgust in his voice bothered me. I didn't understand my own reaction to what he was saying and needed some space between us.

"You must be the densest shifter I have ever set eyes on or had the displeasure of speaking to. And to think, we are tied to you in this bond..." Rhiannon spat in a venomous hiss.

"He's right," I cut in. "We don't know anything about multiple mate bonds or how they work. I for one can't fathom why I have a mate, much less two. I'm no shifter, so this makes little sense to me." I didn't turn to face them but instead look out across the deep blue sea I once called home.

"Tell me Rhiannon, how is my mother and the rest of my family?" I hadn't seen them in two hundred years. I'd heard about them like everyone else, through rumors and updates from delegations that had visited to form alliances, but nothing about them personally. I was curious to know if they were happy or if they missed me.

"Your mother is... She is a strong queen, but a lonely woman. Your father is no longer living in the palace and your sisters have all bonded, but they remain with the queen. She is consumed with keeping her people alive. A strange sickness has taken hold of some of the smaller towns in her kingdom and her physicians have no idea how to counter it. They've tried everything from herbal and natural remedies to magic. It's a plague that is spreading slowly but steadily. She requested our delegation form an alliance primarily to find new remedies that were not native to her kingdom. When she learned what I could do, she sought me out separately to discuss you."

There was so much more I wanted to know, but knowing my mother, she wouldn't have shared her innermost feelings and thoughts with a stranger.

"For what it's worth, she misses you terribly and is obviously worried about you. She didn't say as much, but her

actions conveyed that. She didn't say this, but I got the sense she fears what may come and that you are at the center of it." She stopped speaking, letting me process what she shared.

"This is all so confusing and bizarre. Up until a few weeks ago I couldn't speak, and when that changed, it seemed like everything else changed, too," I said to myself, but I know they heard me.

Lysander jumped in. "The modification of the contract triggered certain events. Donyale, this is what we discussed. We didn't know what would happen, only that *something* would." His growly voice sent shivers down my spine. "The mate bonds are one of those events. Who knows if the bonds would have fully manifested if you hadn't altered the contract." He sounded accusatory.

Rhiannon scowled at his response and shook her head.

I finally turned to him, angry that he wanted to lay blame at my feet for our predicament. "If you recall, Lysander, our partial bond was formed prior to the contract amendment being completed. And, if I remember correctly, you pursued me. I don't understand why you would do that if you were so reluctant to form a bond with me. Surely you knew what that connection, that pull was."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, chest expanding and stretching the confines of his shirt, drawing my eyes to his impossibly broad and muscular chest and making my insides burn for him. Angry at my physical response to him, I tried to suppress my desire, which then triggered a pull from what I guess was the bond trying to bring me closer to him, like I needed to get as close to him as possible. Frowning, I look at Rhiannon, but didn't feel the same pull. Rubbing my chest where the almost-painful tug resided, I turned back around to face the window.

"Your bond is breaking," Rhiannon said gently. "That is what you feel: your soul is trying to reconnect you to him. It's the bond's fight for survival. The longer you deny it, the more painful it will become until it severs completely. You don't need a ritual to break it; that's a misconception. By stating and

committing to severing the bond, you have already started the process. It will become more painful as your souls try to pull you together to prevent that from happening. You should think hard about whether you want this. I can see your souls and they are meant to be together as much as ours, Donyale.”

“I never wanted to be tied to another after what’s happened to me. This isn’t how I envisioned my life turning out after finding the witch. I don’t want any of this.” The last was said in a harsh whisper.

“That may be, but I believe that you and I were meant to find each other. I do not regret our connection or our bond.” She stood behind me and wrapped her arms around me tightly, almost fiercely. “I will let you think on all this. It isn’t an easy choice, nor will it get any easier as we continue, but I will be by your side until the end.”

A warmth spread through my chest at her words. I had to remember that I had a family in Mara, Solara, Alexa, Leanne—and maybe now Rhiannon. I didn’t know her well, but my bond to her told me everything I needed to know for now. The rest would come with time.

She unwrapped her arms around me and gathered what remained of her things. “I’ll see you in the morning in the lobby, Donyale. From now on, I won’t leave your side.”

A moment later, I hear the door click shut.

The room was blanketed in silence. Curious at what Lysander was thinking, I turned around once more. He was sitting with his head in his hands. I didn’t move near him even though it hurt. He’d made it abundantly clear that he wanted no part of me in his life, so I had to respect that, even if it sent sharp needles of pain to my heart. Wishing I could just turn my heart off for a few moments, I tried to look at this from his perspective, and couldn’t figure out his aversion to the bond.

“Why?”

Just one word had him jerking his head up to look at me. Voice roughened by anger or some other emotion, he responded, “Why what?”

“Why did you come to me that night when you didn’t want the bond?” I had to know because that was driving so much confusion in all this. He was always waiting for me and initiating all contact. His actions made no sense.

“It shouldn’t have happened. I had no intention of sealing the bond or attempting to. I wanted to speak to you, but my dragon had other thoughts. I don’t blame him completely. I’ve wanted you from the moment I laid eyes on you. I kept away because the glamour charms we used to mask our size and essence would have been nullified if I made contact with you because of the bond. The bond bares your soul completely, including your physical form. That is why after that night, you saw me as I really am.” He looked away from me for a moment.

“I cannot complete this bond with you, Donyale. I won’t. I’m sorry for the pain I am causing you. If it’s any consolation, I feel it, too. It’s one of the reasons I have been reacting to everything with anger. I don’t pretend this is fair to you or even me, but we cannot complete our bonding. Maybe, if the gods are willing, they will gift you another mate that is worthier and desires the bond. It cannot be me.” He clamped his jaw closed, stopping anything else from spilling out of his mouth.

Confused, I walked over to sit in the chair opposite him. “I don’t understand any of this. I don’t even know what I want anymore, and I think the bond is confusing my desires with its own. Where do we go from here? I don’t want to fight with you Lysander, but you almost killed a man for touching me and then profess your commitment to breaking our fragile bond. It’s all bizarre.”

His eyes traced every plane and angle on my face and landed on my lips for an excruciatingly long time. He finally shifted his gaze to the floor, dark strands of hair falling forward, hiding his face from me. “I tried to control it, but obviously failed. There are times my dragon pushes his intention beyond my control, and I’m relegated to watching him drive while I become a passenger in my own body. This was one of those times. I cannot guarantee that he won’t do it

again. As a matter of fact, where you are concerned, he is absolutely adamant that you are his and will do whatever he needs to seal the bond. There are reasons I cannot let that happen, and I cannot share these reasons with you.”

He stopped me as I opened my mouth to ask what those were. “If we are to make it to Skolos without any more incidents, we’ll need to ensure that we don’t trigger his protective or possessive instincts. Don’t get me wrong, Donyale—I was also trying to control my own rage at seeing another male with you, and the stench of him on you nearly drove me to the killing edge along with my dragon. But, despite the both of us, I maintained some rational thought throughout this whole mess.”

I was even more confused now. This guy was all over the place. His approach was to push me away and hurt me while also showing me he cared. Shaking my head, I decided it was enough.

“Lysander, one minute you’re hot and the next you’re cold. It’s disorienting, to say the least. I don’t know what to make of the mate bonds, though I understand your desire to go without them. I respect your decision around the bond. Up until now I’ve shared your feelings about it. I don’t understand what’s happening, but I think we need to figure it out. I can’t promise that I won’t trigger your protective instincts but I’ll do my best.” That was all I could give him.

“So...I think it’s best you leave now.” That hurt so much worse after I said it. But I was glad it came out steady and strong. He rose, and I had to crane my head back to continue meeting his beautiful cobalt eyes, which were glowing slightly. His hands were fisted at his sides. I knew his dragon was close to the surface.

Not saying another word, he turned and walked to the door. He stopped with his hand on the doorknob, and I held my breath, hoping with all that was in me he’d come back. My mind wanted this to be logical and straightforward, but my heart and soul were complicating the situation with their need to have him. He stood there for what seemed like hours—but really was more like a few minutes—stiff with tension. Not

sure if he was fighting an inner battle with his dragon, I stayed seated on the edge of my chair, waiting to see who would win.

Suddenly, he jerked the door open and stepped out without looking back. I should have been relieved, but somehow all I felt was my heart breaking as I watched his back retreat beyond the doorway. Or maybe that was my soul crying out for him. Either way, the pain was agonizing. How would I be able to deal with any of it as we journeyed together to Skolos?

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The sound of a fist pounding on my door jerked me awake. I blearily looked in that direction, trying to make sense of what I was hearing. My head felt like it had been split open by an axe and I groaned loudly. My roiling stomach didn't help the situation either. I felt like I'd had a full night of bingeing sex and alcohol. Oh wait, that's exactly what happened.

Voices sounded directly after another round of fist-slammings against the door. "Don, Don, it's us! Are you okay?" Mara shouted through the door.

Realizing that my friends were frantic, I stood up from the couch where I must have passed out and stiffly walked to the door. I remembered very little of what happened after Lysander left, except that I needed something to help me forget how he made me feel and that the bar was conveniently fully stocked.

Holding my head gingerly and trying not to move too quickly because my stomach felt like it had taken residence in the back of my throat, I finally made it to the door and unbolted it. My friends spilled into the room as if they had all three been leaning on the door. I watched them fall on top of each other and then turned and walked back to the bed. I glanced out the window; it was still early, and I could get in a few more hours sleep.

"Don, talk to us. Are you ok?" This time it was Alexa.

Waving my hand nonchalantly—or what I thought was nonchalantly—I finally made it to bed and gently climbed into its comforting softness. “I’m fine. I didn’t realize that the little bit of liquor I drank would be so potent.”

“Um, there are four empty decanters over here, Don.” Leanne’s disapproval was evident in her tone.

“Like I said, it was potent.” A soft groan escaped me when my head settled onto the pillow and my brain decided to rearrange the room by spinning it. There was utter silence after that and I knew they were looking at each other, communicating in that way we do when working through a sensitive issue.

“We met Rhiannon. She’s...nice.”

I squinted at Alexa with one eye. “What did she tell you?”

“Not much, just that you may need our support. She said the rest is up to you to share. Of course, running into a stranger who tells you that your best friend needs you was enough to send us all into a panic to get to you. After everything that’s happened, nothing surprises us anymore. We came ready.”

I glanced down at Alexa’s attire and realized she was dressed for battle. Glancing at the others, I noticed that they were, too. Mara looked like she’d bought the entire store of sharp blades and strapped the inventory to her body. It warmed my heart that they came ready to fight whatever demon might be attacking me. In this case, it was my own internal struggle with what was happening. I shouldn’t have turned to alcohol, but I’d been in a bad place last night after Lysander. Just thinking about it brought big fat tears to my eyes. Not wanting to see their reaction to my emotions, I draped my arm over my eyes and willed the tears to disappear.

It felt like I’d lost something vital last night, but in reality, nothing had changed between Lysander and me. I also needed to tell the girls about Rhiannon.

“Here, drink this.”

Leanne’s voice interrupted my thoughts. Moving my arm, I tried to focus on what she handed me. From what I could tell,



it was a vial of shimmering, clear green liquid. Hating that my hand shook when I reached out to grab it, I tried to ignore the looks they gave each other as I downed the elixir. Surprisingly, it tasted lemony and immediately settled my stomach.

“Don, you haven’t told us anything. What happened?” I could hear Solara moving around and glanced to the opposite side of the bed. Soft dawn light was filtering through the window, so her face was mostly in shadow, but I could tell she was worried.

“You all should take a seat. I’m sure you’ll be just as floored as I was when all this went down.” Feeling better after drinking that tube of green fluid, I sat up and waited for my friends to sit down. All of them chose to be with me on the bed, sitting cross-legged and attentive.

Not wanting to beat around the bush, I dove right in. “Apparently, I have multiple mates.”

The shock on their faces must have been identical to mine when I first found out.

“Rhiannon is my second mate. She knew when she met me that we were true mates. I didn’t. I just felt the same kind of attraction for her as I did for Lysander. At first it was just physical, but then I started feeling an almost deep connection to her. It isn’t fully formed yet, but if I concentrate, I can feel her soul linked directly to mine, here.” I pointed to my chest. “It’s like a string that I can tug on to get her attention.”

“Wait, hold on, you and that hot-ass chick are mates? How did you bond? I mean, bonding with Lysander required you to have sex... Oh, *niiiiice*.” Alexa’s humor bled though as she whistled. “But why would she think you needed our help?”

“Lysander.” My voice shook a little.

“What happened?” Solara spoke up for the first time.

“Well, we were about to have a bit of fun with the host, a Fae male. Somehow, Lysander’s dragon sensed what was happening and flew into a rage. He tracked me down and almost killed the male. Madame Pauline intervened, which by the way, that woman is as beautiful as she is scary. I’ve never

seen anything like her aura, well, except for Lysander's. Anyway, she basically fined me for the disruption and the harm done to the male but allowed me to stay because she was friends with my mother once upon a time." Taking a breath, I paused to gather my thoughts.

"So, Madame Pauline is more than we thought, huh? Your mother doesn't hang out with just anyone, let alone a 'madame,' even if she is one of the most notorious and successful businesswomen." Solara's pensive comment got us all thinking about Madame Pauline and wondering about her history.

"Well, that isn't something I want to dig into now. She did ask me to see her before she left. She mentioned she had something that belonged to me." Shaking my head, I ventured back into the mess that was my life.

"Lysander was the one who revealed who Rhiannon was. Madame Pauline was questioning who she was and why she was in her establishment and Lysander outed her. At the time, I didn't process what he said. He was still holding the Fae male encased in water and looked like he was going to tear him to pieces."

"If a mate suspects that another has touched his bonded, it's grounds for death, usually the excruciatingly painful kind," Leanne helpfully interjected for the others.

"I couldn't understand why he would give a shit, but honestly, it wasn't him at all who was present the room; it was his dragon. Between Madame Pauline and me, we managed to convince him to release the male after he had passed out from lack of oxygen." Solara had gotten off the bed and poured a glass of water, handing it to me when she returned to her seated position.

Taking a sip, I continued. "After Madame Pauline left, I think I was just trying to process everything. Lysander's dragon was still struggling to maintain control. Apparently, it has something to do with the fact that I had another male's scent all over me, and his dragon was riding a killing edge that Lysander could barely keep leashed. Anyway, I bathed to

make sure the male's scent was gone, and Rhiannon had the housekeepers come and change the sheets and air out the room." I thought back to everything that came after that moment and my heart started aching fiercely. Covering up the emotion, I drank more water.

"So, what happened after that?" Mara prodded.

"Rhiannon shared that, historically, there have been instances of multiple mates bonding to one central Fae, and that they usually manifested in times of great darkness. Lysander began arguing that she was taking stories from eons past as truth and that she didn't really know anything about multiple mating bonds. That was his argument for continuing to sever the bond. I didn't want any of these bonds to begin with. What I don't understand is why I feel so distraught over his insistence that he doesn't want to be bonded to me." My voice cracked at the end.

Leanne gently reached out and touched my hand in sympathy. "Don, mate bonds—true mate bonds—defy logic. There is little we know about how mates are paired, but what *is* known is that the bond itself accelerates feelings of love and devotion. It's almost instant. He may be fighting it, but make no mistake: he feels everything you are feeling."

"It's confusing as fuck and I wish it had never happened. I have no control over my emotions—me, who is all about control, has lost every bit of it with a dragon shifter who absolutely hates the idea of bonding with me. Rhiannon seemed baffled then furious with him for pushing me away. She's a spirit elemental by the way"—a collective gasp sounded in the room—"and she mentioned that his rejection was already severing the bond, and that it would continue to fray as time passed, causing us both untold pain."

"She's a spirit elemental? Don, that's unheard of. They're supposed to be extremely powerful. Dangerous, too," Mara whispered.

"My mother sent her to help me." There was no sound in the room except the wind gently butting up against the window after I said that. My mother hadn't communicated

with me since I was sixteen. I figured she thought I had died—why else wouldn't she try to find me? That was a door I wanted to leave closed. My heart couldn't take another round of beatings.

“Okay, well why did she send her?” Alexa prodded.

“Mother received news that I was in danger, and she asked Rhiannon if she would help me. Rhiannon agreed because she felt like this was her calling, her purpose. It all seems surreal, you know?”

“The gods work in ways we can never understand. Now, what happened with Lysander that drove you to down the entire bar in the room?” Leanne pushed.

“Right before Rhiannon left, she assured me that she would stand by me and cement our bond. I didn't know what to think about it because I was so focused on Lysander and the painful ache coming from my chest. She told me it would continue to worsen as time went by if he refused to cement his bond. I didn't tell her that I had agreed to it and it could be me preventing the bond from forming, but then, why was my bond with Rhiannon fine? It made no sense.”

“You weren't raised as a shifter. What I know is that you do have some control over the bond and that you can work to fracture it or prevent it from fully locking into place. He would know how to do that. You're not a shifter and therefore have less control over whether the bond solidifies is my guess. Rhiannon wants the bond and is freely giving herself to you. You may still reject her, but from the looks of it, your soul has already accepted her.” Of course, Leanne would know more about mate bonds given she was a physician.

“So, you're saying that because I'm ignorant of what's happening, my body and soul are just accepting what they think is right?”

“Basically, yes. Even though Lysander feels the same pull, and his dragon is fighting hard for the bond, he still knows how to delay or stop it from fully forming. Did he say anything about why he refused to form the bond?”

“No, he’s secretive as hell. The fucker is keeping me in the dark. Claims it’s to protect me, but I think that’s bullshit. I don’t know what to think about any of this.” The frustration bled through my voice. “I’m no shifter, yet I have true mate bonds with two shifters. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Nothing the gods do make sense, Don.” This time Solara’s voice sounded subdued. She more than anyone had reason to doubt what the gods did, but she still fiercely believed in them anyway. “It’s not something we should try to understand but try to adapt to. Whatever is thrown your way, you can handle it. You have us, too, to help you.”

She gripped my hand tightly, letting me know she would always have my back. The rest of my friends/family reached out and piled their hands on top of ours, showing their solidarity. Looking at our joined hands, I felt a sense of fulfillment that my friends would always be there no matter what. I grinned at them, and the sense of confusion, heartache and frustration eased just enough to allow a huge yawn to overtake me.

“Come, we are all exhausted. We’ve had a long, hard night and some rest will do us good.” Leanne, always the physician, started ushering us back to our rooms to rest.

Laughing, Alexa piped up. “Some of us have had a long and hard *something*, but it wasn’t a ‘night...’” Everyone stopped and stared at her. “Too soon?” Her innocent expression wasn’t fooling anyone, and we all laughed at her joke.

“Wait, don’t leave. This bed is big enough for all of us and then some. We could rest here so long as Mara removes all the knives she has strapped to her clothes.” I didn’t want to admit that I wanted their company because I was afraid of being alone with my thoughts. I knew I wasn’t ready yet to process everything that happened. We still had several hours before we needed to start our day, and it could wait until then.

My friends weren’t fooled, but they made no mention of my state of mind. They agreed, although Leanne chose to sleep on the long couch instead of the large bed. I walked to

the bathroom and found several different-sized clean night clothes. I changed out of my robe, brushed out my hair and walked back to the bedroom. My friends were already tucked in bed, whispering to each other. No doubt about me and the fuckery my life had become. Shaking my head, I made my way over to get some well-deserved sleep.

But when I lay down and tried, my mind kept circling back to Rhiannon and Lysander and our conversation. My heart ached all over again at his reaction to me. Rubbing my chest where the dull pain persisted, I tried to put him out of my mind with meditation techniques. As soon as I thought I'd relieved it, my chest flared with pain again as if it wanted to constantly remind me of its injured state. Sighing, I thought of Rhiannon and how different my bond with her felt. It was immediately accepting of me and snapped into place as if it was always there.

I explored the bond with her to see if any physical manifestation would occur, like what was happening with Lysander's and my bond. Closing my eyes, I concentrated on Rhiannon, looking internally, deep within me, for her essence. There it was: a deep opalescent tether that reminded me of her eyes connected me to her. I followed the rope of magic, checking where it led inside of me, and found a brilliant golden light at the center of what I thought was my sternum. The light was so intense that I could barely look directly at it. It reminded me of Madame Pauline's aura, only mine was a deeper gold with red hints of color, like molten lava.

A memory popped into my thoughts then: The vision I'd had on the ship as we went to collect Giselle. A wheel of colors anchored by a golden disc of power that looked just like my power source.

Snapping my eyes wide open, I tried to calm my racing heart. Two of those colors—cobalt blue and black opal—I knew. Yet there were also green and red threads connected to the golden center. Shaking my head, I denied what I recalled. It couldn't be true. Because if it was, that meant there were two other bonds—two mates—still waiting for me out there.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A knocking woke us. It was insistent but not urgent, which meant it was likely the establishment trying to get us up and out. I heard multiple groans in the room. We were all lacking sleep, but at least we got in a few hours before they came to kick us out. Stretching, I glanced over to check on everyone. Leanne was dressed and looking fresh as a daisy. She was a morning person, as was Alexa, who was walking out of the bathroom as Leanne opened the door. Solara and Mara were burrowed under the covers, awake but not awake. Grinning at the normalcy of the situation, I eased myself up on my elbows and watched Leanne take a message from the person on the other side of the door.

“Who was that?” Alexa asked as Leanne shut the door.

“Apparently, Madame Pauline requests Don’s presence this morning, and the invitation extends to us, Rhiannon and Lysander.” She looked to me at the mention of my dragon mate.

Grimacing, I threw the covers off me and walked into the bathroom to get myself ready. I’d had enough of this pity party over Lysander. I needed to woman-up and deal with each problem as it arose. He wasn’t willing to bend on the mate bond issue nor was he willing to share the reasons why. I’d have to be okay with that and let things play out how they may, my heart be damned. I hadn’t survived two hundred years by being a sap and letting the world guide me by my heartstrings. Captain Beryl had made sure of that.

Firming my resolve and hardening myself against the emotional turmoil that was presently distracting me, I looked in the mirror and remembered who I was. I reminded myself of my grit, resilience and determination in achieving whatever I set my sights on, and that I had been through hell and back to get to where I was today. The fact that I was now in the middle of an unknown path that led who knew where was irrelevant because I could handle it. I had to. Staring at myself—from my thick dark-mahogany tresses with golden-red streaks to my olive-toned skin, chocolate-brown eyes and a face that reminded me of my mother and yet not—I gave myself a final once-over and made sure I was dressed and emotionally armed for whatever was coming.

Walking out to the bedroom, I found all of my friends dressed and armed. Solara and Mara rushed by me to perform their morning routine before we headed out to visit Madame Pauline. “Did we send a message or inquire about Rhiannon and Lysander attending this get-together with Madame Pauline?”

“The messenger said they’ve been given the same invitation. Not sure if they’ll accept—well, Rhiannon will, but Lysander is a moody son of a bitch, so who knows what he’ll do,” Leanne quipped.

Nodding, I felt a twinge of guilt for sending Rhiannon away. We really didn’t know each other, and the moment she shared our bond I panicked and let her leave. Disappointed in myself for what I thought amounted to running away from the issue, I vowed to do better.

“Ready?” Alexa’s voice snapped me out of my inner monologue.

Taking a deep, cleansing breath, I nodded.

We stepped out of our room, and there was an escort waiting to guide us. It took several minutes to make our way to Madame Pauline’s office. We arrived in a circular foyer that connected three different hallways. We traversed from the center, and Rhiannon and Lysander showed up separately from each of the other hallways. Steeling my heart against



Lysander's particular brand of torture, I glanced at him and nodded in greeting and then looked at Rhiannon and smiled. She looked a bit withdrawn at first, but seeing my greeting, her lips quirked up at the corners and her countenance changed dramatically, almost like an inner glow was shining through her.

I could sense Lysander's eyes on me but ignored it. I was done giving him my time and attention. I couldn't contribute to the battle he was fighting with his dragon. I had agreed to sever the bond after all. Even though I no longer wanted that, it wasn't my sole decision to make. Frowning, I realized that I *did* want the bond with him. I wasn't sure when that changed, but it was the truth. Giving myself a mental shake, I reminded myself that it didn't matter whether I wanted it or not; he had to want it. And he didn't, so I needed to get past the hurt and move on.

Rhiannon moved to join me and my friends made room for her, fanning out behind me as she stood next to me. She brushed her hand against mine, and a zing of pleasure whipped through me at the contact. Yes, this felt right, it felt like home. Lysander stayed where he was, arms akimbo, trying hard to ignore Rhiannon and me standing as one. Taking a deep breath, we waited for Madame Pauline.

It took a few minutes before a tall, statuesque blonde bombshell walked out of the double doors leading to what we assumed was Madame Pauline's office. She carried herself like a warrior, her posture at odds with the elegant décor in the foyer, but she was dressed professionally, like she worked for the madame.

"Madame Pauline is ready for you." Her musical voice traveled over me, coating me in a soothing warmth, wrapping me in feelings of safety and belonging. Trying to shake off the feeling, I took a step forward toward the open double doors. The rest followed me in, with Lysander taking up the rear.

"Good, there you are." Madame Pauline didn't look up from whatever document she was signing, but sat behind a huge wooden desk that dominated the room just as she dominated the very atmosphere within it. She was gorgeous,

yet I could sense danger in her presence. Her looks offered a false sense of security. This woman was possibly the most intimidating individual I had ever met. There was something about her that screamed power.

“Sit. This will take a while to explain and I’m sure some of it will shock you.”

Taking her direction, we walked to the sitting area in the office and tried to pretend we were comfortable. Silence greeted us as she finished whatever task she was on. We had nothing to do but look at each other and try to wait patiently. I was just starting to get annoyed when she put her fountain pen down and rose from her seat. She rose to her full height, and I was reminded how tall she was.

She strode over to the sitting area and took the empty seat next to Lysander. She sat straight-backed, with perfect posture, but there was a predatory air about her that made me nervous. Looking at each of us in turn, she settled her gaze on me and said absolutely nothing for several moments. I didn’t drop my gaze, but it felt as if there was something she was looking for. Not sure what to make of it, I waited for her to speak. After all, she had invited us here.

“Your time is running out, Donyale. You need to get to Skolos and see the Dragon Oracle. She will reveal your path from there.”

For a moment I just sat there, and then I got angry. “So, you called us all here to tell me I need to get to Skolos as fast as possible and see this ‘Dragon Oracle.’ You could have told me that in a written message yesterday, and we’d have already been finished with our preparations and on our way to Skolos.” I kept my voice steady.

She raised an eyebrow at my response and clearly didn’t like my tone in the least; I was glad when she didn’t react with anger, but annoyance. “Child, you have no idea what you’re involved in, do you? There is a dark evil that is spreading its toxicity into this world, and its leader is your father. Your *biological* father. He came here several hundred years ago, a beautiful, incredibly strong male Fae possessing immense

charm and intelligence only matched by his avarice. He wanted to rule, you see, and failed miserably. He wasn't of this world; his methods for achieving his goal were unsound and unsavory, to say the least, so the Fae here turned their backs on him where once they held their doors wide open.

“He was also a seer and had discovered that what he sought wouldn't be gained through marriage or alliance, but through conquest. The problem was that he was only able to come through to our world alone. He was extremely gifted, but to maintain a portal between worlds takes an immense amount of power—even some of the gods would not be able to hold it open for more than a few minutes. He needed something or someone to breach the walls between the worlds, keeping the door open for him as long as it took to get what he wanted.

“He needed the right bloodline to do this. Of course, there were only a few of us that had the right ancestry, and from those only a select few would be vulnerable enough to succumb to his particular charm and magic.”

“What type of bloodline was he searching for?” Leanne had leaned forward as the Madame told her story.

“Only that which is one step removed from the original gods or titans and wields great power, particularly over all five elements. While there are numerous offspring that the gods have fathered, only a handful have the kind of power that he was looking for. And of those, only a few are female. One of them is your mother, Donyale.

“I was with her when she met your biological father. He swept her away, made her feel like she was the only woman for him, and in some ways she was. But Poseidon refused to allow any relationship between the two beyond an acquaintanceship. Your mother was no weak-willed Fae. She was as strong as Poseidon and fiercely held on to her independence. But in this, Poseidon won. She might have left with the deceiver had something else not occurred right before she was set to leave with him: she met her consort and fell in love. Their love was something out of legends. It almost resembled a mate bond, but that was impossible because bonded Fae haven't been seen or heard of in eons. We used to

bond as soulmates, similar to true mate bonds, but for some reason those bonds faded. But with your mother and her consort, it was different. It was as if history had come alive again.

“Furious, your biological father devised another means to get what he wanted. He waited until your mother and father were married and living comfortably—felt safe—before putting his plan into motion.”

Madame Pauline paused for a few moments, gazing out the one gigantic window adjacent to us, collecting her thoughts. I was in rapture at hearing the story of my heritage but didn't want to disrupt her musings. Taking a measured breath, she continued.

“He glamoured himself one night, first as a servant in the palace, then later a guard, and finally, as your mother's consort to sneak into her chambers. She was asleep and your father deep in conversation with a neighboring kingdom, trying to broker a new alliance. He was responsible for strengthening the relations between your mother's kingdom and other powerful ones. These conversations required that he work long nights in the beginning, proving himself a worthy consort and valuable member of one of the most powerful families in the world.

“Your biological father snuck in while your mother's consort was otherwise occupied. He glamoured himself to look like her consort and woke your mother and had sex with her. She didn't know it wasn't her husband until much later. She knew something was off, but it looked and felt like her husband, so she ignored her instincts. This happened multiple times until you were conceived.

“By combining his bloodline with your mother's, he was able to create a new bloodline that not only would help him breach the fabric between our worlds but maintain it simply by existing. Your birth is the reason these creatures are here and are reshaping our world to suit their needs. They are indeed terraforming this world so they can survive. The ones you have seen are but the first, mindless minions that your father has sent through to prepare for the full invasion. The breach is

open now, has been for over two hundred years, but recently, its edges began fraying, widening the gap incrementally.”

I cut her off before she could continue. “How do you know this? All of this?”

“I’ve been with your mother since the beginning. I was with her when she found out that you were not Oren’s—her consort’s—child, and when she learned of the deception that was your creation. It never changed how she felt about you. She loves you deeply and beyond anything in this world, but she feels like what’s happening is her fault. Oren doesn’t know you aren’t his. You look too much like Poseidon to question your parentage. Even though your sisters take after him, he never believed anything other than that you were his, and you still are. He is your father, even though his blood doesn’t flow in your veins.

“Your mother visited the Great Oracle a few years after you were born. She sensed something different about your powers; they were beyond hers and, she suspected, even Poseidon’s, but there was something different about yours that no one could understand, almost like a different essence accompanied your magical signature. The Oracle revealed the truth to her. Your mother came to me afterward and told me everything. I promised to keep her secret and help her when the time came. And so it has come.”

“Why you?” My voice came out a little shaky.

“Because I am her closest friend and ally in this world. We share a history and parentage, or at least one parent. I am your aunt Athene.” She didn’t smile or show warmth when she said it, just pure facts.

“You and my mother are sisters, daughters of Poseidon?” I rephrased what she’d just said to make sure I’d heard her correctly.

“Yes, child. I thought I just said that. Your mother and I grew up together. We were inseparable really. I met your biological father when he targeted my sister. He was one of the most beautiful Fae males I have ever laid eyes on, and powerful, too. No one really knows where he came from or

why he contains so much elemental ability. He's proficient in all five, just like Rhodes, but there was an edge of darkness about him that bothered me. I think Rhodes liked that dark edge to him. She liked the bad boys, much to our father's dismay. Poseidon wasn't around much, but when it came to the mixing of his bloodline, you'd think he was the most attentive father in the world."

"I thought Zeus was your father... That's what we're taught." Mara sounded skeptical.

"Yes, and that is intentional. The pantheon wants to maintain an air of obscurity and mystery about our genealogy. It was also due to my uncle wanting a claim to my power. I am the goddess of wisdom and warcraft. His vanity couldn't take that his brother sired me instead of him, so he rewrote history. But that is a story for another time. I brought you here to share your lineage and to provide you with a few things. First, you must know that your biological father will do anything to fulfill his dream of ruling this world. This extends to you, Donyale. He sired you for one purpose and that is to rip open the portal between his world and ours. He will try to take you, charm you the moment he gets his hands on you. He is very good at persuasion, so you must be on your guard. To rip the fabric wide open, he needs to make a sacrifice, one that carries the blood of this world and his."

Lysander snarled viciously and a pulse of power exploded from Rhiannon at the mention of my death, knocking everyone back in their seats. Looking at them, I saw fear and rage swirling in the depths of their eyes. In Lysander's glowing blue orbs, his dragon stared protectively at me, melting my heart a little with his fierceness.

Turning away, I looked to Athene. She was nodding in approval at both Lysander and Rhiannon. "Good, you will need your mates to help you on this journey. For just as much as you can rip the portal wide open, you are the only one that can close it."

I sat up straight at this. No one had mentioned that I could *close* it.

“When we first discovered the portal,” Athene said, “I was sent as part of the original scouting party by the gods to investigate. What we found was that the portal uniquely responds to sound. We had several sirens in the group who, one night, were practicing their craft on some other members of the crew when the ones guarding the portal noticed the portal’s frayed ends were starting to knit back together, or at least trying to. We immediately brought the sirens closer and pushed them to increase the power in their voice as they sang. Unfortunately, they weren’t powerful enough to close it, but they managed to narrow it slightly. For years, we kept bringing more and more sirens to see if they could close it. It narrowed slightly, but nothing more.

“I visited your mother at around this time. You were about four or five, and she had just welcomed your second sister. I was walking the halls with her, telling her about the issue with the portal. She was very quiet, almost pensive as I told her the details of the challenge we faced. We hadn’t seen anything come through the portal yet, but we hadn’t ventured into it either. We were being very cautious. It was guarded then—still is, day and night—but our efforts weren’t enough. After many failed attempts at using every siren, we could find to close it, we realized their voices weren’t powerful enough. And given any other sound wasn’t effective, we figured there must be some special magic missing from the common siren’s voice.

“I hadn’t seen you since you were born, so I had no idea what power you had inherited. Your mother said nothing to me about your voice, but I could tell something was troubling her. I pushed until I got her to tell me what was on her mind. It was you. She didn’t say much but showed me what you could do. I walked to the atrium, which was your place, your hideaway, and she let me wander the area. There were formations that were not naturally made, new life springing from them that I had never seen before, sprung from a child’s imagination. I also saw destruction, the likes of which only Titans like Gaia were known to manifest—entire sections of the earth gone, disintegrated. I didn’t know what to make of it, so I turned to her and asked.

“She told me you did this. You, a child of two worlds. Of course, at the time we didn’t know that, but we did know you were something more than what we originally thought. She said emotion drove your actions. The creations were made when you experienced joy, peace, love; the other when you were in a rage, unhappy, sad. But you couldn’t control it. You were only a child. I asked her how you did it. She said you did it by using your voice. She couldn’t explain the power; no one in our bloodline has this gift. She mentioned that you could also compel people, something she was working very hard to ensure you didn’t misuse. She took me to see you but refused to let me test if you could help with the portal. Your power was too unstable, and you were too inexperienced to control it properly. You might have ended up widening the tear instead of closing it, letting who knows what into our world.”

Athene paused, her eyes distant. “I saw you, just a little thing with a beautiful thick mane of dark hair and large inquisitive eyes, playing with your friends in the amphitheater. There was a different aura around you than anything I’d ever seen, except once.”

“My biological father...” I whispered.

Nodding, she continued. “I didn’t put two and two together then, but it nagged me for a long time, until the Oracle revealed your lineage. Then I remembered his aura. Needless to say, your mother made sure I kept my distance. She didn’t want you involved in any of this, and I understood then. But in all the years we’ve been guarding the portal, fighting the creatures that come through, we’ve never found another solution. And we’ve tried so many options. We’ve sent warriors through to the other side, never to see them return. The air around the portal is toxic, so we have had all sorts of breathing contraptions created through magical means and technical as well, but still no warrior has returned.

“I volunteered to go, but my father forbade it. After losing so many, we decided to stop sending people through and built a fortified military station staffed with our best warriors from across the world to minimize the loss of life on this world. Some days we are successful in preventing the creatures from



coming into our world, although more recently, over the last hundred years, they've become bolder and stronger. They are learning, which is probably the most chilling piece of it all. They aren't mindless beasts, at least not all of them. Someone or something is guiding them, and whatever it is, their mind is cunning and tactically sound. I've had to spend more and more of my time there to help offset the tactics being employed, but my responsibilities take me away sometimes. Like today.

“Donyale, you need to complete your training as quickly as possible. I would venture to guess you haven't learned anything that would help you understand how to use your voice given you haven't had one in over two hundred years. That witch certainly did her job well when your father engaged her in his schemes. What you should know is that the gift of voice did not come from your father, but from Gaia herself. When she found the portal and what was happening to this world, her creation, she decided to bestow a small portion of her magic on you. This was revealed to your mother by the Oracle. You are protected by the gods, but you must stay the course. You know how fickle they can be if their will is denied. You were born to be an instrument of destruction, but of which world—ours or theirs—remains to be seen.

“You are of my blood, but make no mistake: turning away from this destiny will anger all the gods, including me. I've seen countless die in an effort to keep this vicious army from pouring in and annihilating our world, and I will do everything in my power to keep that from happening.” The last was said with conviction; no emotion bled into her words, just pure determination to do what must be done.

Lysander and Rhiannon stood immediately and blocked me from view, sensing the same implicit threat I did. Lysander looked like he had expanded in size, ready to shift, and Rhiannon was pulling on what looked like shadows, a black bow materializing in her hands. Athene waved her hand almost lazily and the shadows disappeared as if they were mist in the wake of the sun. But the bow remained with an arrow pointing straight at her heart.

Chuckling, she stood. “This is good. You will need them on this journey, Donyale. I have one last thing for you to listen to, and then I will let you be on your way. They are only two of four mates that you must bond with. The others you will need to find before you attempt to close the portal. The Oracle was very clear: trying to close it without all your mate bonds in place will only work temporarily. It requires the strength of the most powerful Fae in this world. You already have two bonded mates that meet that requirement, but the other two are still out there. You will need them in the end. Closing the portal will be something that requires sacrifice, Donyale.” She held a hand up before I could ask what that sacrifice was.

“The Oracle was not clear about what form that sacrifice will take, only that one is required, and that you will need everyone in this room and then some to fulfill this quest. This is your fate. Your father thinks your role is to be fulfilled in your death, but he doesn’t realize what the gods gave you: you have a chance to save our world. He must not know. He will continue to hunt you to rip that portal wide open, so you will need the help of your friends and mates to stay alive. Do not underestimate him. He is ruthless and cares only about achieving his end goal.”

I was still stuck on four mates. I heard everything she said afterward, but my mind kept circling back to that statement. “How can I have *mates*? I’m not a Fae shifter.”

“Child, Fae have mates. They’re called soulmates. Your mother and father, Oren, are suspected of being soulmates, though it hasn’t been proven. Our bonds work differently, and they are rare. Few Fae ever find their soulmates, and they marry or build partnerships for love that grow outside of the bond. Bonds are rare because they only manifest when there is a great need to bring people together, fated to accomplish something the gods intended them to. They still have free will, as I’m sure your dragon has so eagerly shared.” She gave Lysander a pointed and disapproving look. “But their purpose is to bring people together in love and spirit that ties them so closely together that they can share in each other’s magic, helping them achieve whatever outcome the gods preordained for them.”

Walking over to the desk, she picked up two items. One was a very old parchment and the other a book that looked ancient. “Here. This parchment is a map of our world, the most accurate one you’ll ever find. And the book is one on Gaia’s powers. There is a chapter in there about soul bonds. Gaia created true mate and soul bonds, by the way, but she works with the fates to ensure the bonds are bestowed on those that truly deserve to have them. It may help you understand what this all means for you and how your life will change if you accept the bonds. It’s no small commitment, but if given the chance, it can be the most beautiful experience you’ll ever have. Lastly, you will likely run into some of my siblings and cousins on your journey. Not all want you to succeed, so be wary of them and give them nothing. They can be even more dangerous than any creature that leaps through that portal.”

“Why a brothel?” Alexa asked out of left field. “I mean, you’re the goddess of wisdom and warcraft. Why build a house of sensual pleasure? Wouldn’t that be Aphrodite’s or Hedone’s area?”

“Girl, what do you know about the gods?” Athene said. “Aphrodite just likes someone to be pleasuring *her*; she cares nothing for the pleasure of others. As for my sister, Hedone, she lives off the energy that is provided by pleasure, but she knows nothing about how to give it, just take it. My reasons are my own, but I’ll give you this...warcraft for women is more complex than for men. And that is all I will say about it. Besides, I enjoy pleasure. Where I get it matters not—if it accomplishes my goals in the process, so be it.” Her eyes turned sultry, hunger blazing then vanishing from them so quickly that I thought I must have imagined it.

Taking the book and the map, I turned them over in my hands. I looked to Solara and nodded, and she took out several bags of gold and dropped them onto Athene’s desk. “For the damages caused last night. I didn’t intend for your employee to get hurt.” I glanced over to Lysander, who stood stiffly; a low growl of anger rumbled from his chest.

At the mention of the damage, her countenance changed to that of the stern establishment owner who was displeased with

her patrons. “Go, I have work to do.”

“How do we get in touch with you?” Mara asked.

“You don’t. I will find you if the need arises.” Dismissing us, she turned away and walked around her desk to sit in the massive chair.

We all turned at once and made our way out.

Her voice rang out one last time. “I need to speak to the dragon alone—he must stay behind. The rest of you can leave.”

We all stopped at her command and looked back. Lysander seemed pissed at being ordered about but reluctantly made his way back to her desk. He turned back once and caught my eyes with desperate longing that flashed quickly and was gone, suppressed as fast as it had surfaced.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I gnoring the pain in my chest at the act, I forced my expression into a neutral mask and walked out. Rhiannon brushed her shoulder against me, sending warm tendrils of comfort through me. Grateful, I snagged her gaze and smiled. Closing the door quietly behind us, we were met by the intimidating secretary, who looked more like she belonged on the battlefield than in a wealthy brothel. She said nothing, but stood at attention, waiting for who knew what.

“What do you think she’s talking to him about?” Mara’s curiosity sprang forth.

“Who the fuck knows. He’s probably getting an earful from her about his treatment of the Fae male. Or maybe she wants to punish him for it. I hope it’s the latter. Fucker has gotten ornerier since we fought off those pirates.” Alexa shook her head. She knew why that was the case; everyone did. He was fighting the bond, and his dragon was fighting him. It seemed the bond had formed and solidified quickly, or at least in my case it had.

“It doesn’t matter what she’s telling him,” Solara said. “It changes nothing. We at least have more information now. We need to be prepared and stocked up on supplies and weapons. I have a feeling that this will only get rougher as we get closer to Skolos.”

Solara was right. We needed to focus on the task ahead. The issue with Lysander could be dealt with later, and to be honest, I wanted to forget about him for a little while. My heart bloomed with pain at the thought, and I frowned. I

needed to compartmentalize, and soon. These emotions would be the death of me if I didn't.

My hands held the two items Athene gave me. I looked over to the guard/secretary and noticed that she was more focused on monitoring the area than listening to us. But I had no doubt that she could hear us and was processing everything we were saying. Maybe she was trustworthy, but I didn't want to take any chances. Signaling to the others for quiet, I walked to the hallway that I thought led to the exit.

"Solara and Alexa, I need you to go back to the ship and examine this. We need several copies made as well, so we aren't relying on just one. Can you do that, Solara?" She had trained for some time with a cartographer as a child, and she sometimes used her knowledge and skill to redraw maps based on our discoveries.

She reached out her hand and I placed the map in it. "It shouldn't be a problem. How many copies?"

"One for each of us. I don't want to take any chances. Besides, if we get separated, we'll at least know where the others will go. Alexa, we need plans laid out. Think of the worst-case scenarios as well as the best case. I have a feeling we'll need both."

"You got it." She was solemn, which was unusual for my friend. She was typically lighthearted and cracking jokes, easing the tension.

"Is everything alright?" Looking at her face, I could tell that something weighed heavily on her.

"Nothing that I won't get over. This just brings back some unwanted memories. This journey, I mean. Traveling to Skolos, now that it's becoming real, brings it all back."

It dawned on me that she was referring to her past. She had shared with me that she was cast out from her home and country because she had fallen for the wrong person.

I tried to offer comfort. "I'm sorry. I know we'll be passing close to your home..."

“That’s no longer my home. Hasn’t been for a long time. It doesn’t matter. I’ll be fine.” Her tone was stiff with anger. After so many years, she was still riding her abandonment issues. I could relate. That bastard did a number on her just as Reynault did to me. She was strong though, and I didn’t want to push, so I gave her space.

“Alright, Mara will come with me and Rhiannon will accompany Leanne to finish gathering medical supplies. We need to be on our guard. I have a bad feeling about this trip to Skolos. I can’t explain it, but my gut is shooting off all sorts of warning signals.” It was true—since listening to Athene, I’d been riding on the edge of paranoia and diligence. I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were about to head into something awful. I hadn’t survived so long by ignoring my gut, and I wanted to make sure we were as prepared as possible.

Handing the book to Solara, I turned to Rhiannon, and she gazed back at me patiently. She made no move to touch me, even though my body and soul wanted the contact. I appreciated that she was giving me time to adjust and wasn’t pressuring me. We stood there, quietly gazing into each other’s eyes. Yes, sappy, I know.

“Fucking kiss her already, before I do,” Alexa snarked, prompting Mara to laugh under her breath and break the tension. I didn’t, though—kiss her, that is. I reached over and hugged her to me tightly. Just that simple contact made me want to do so much more. She returned my hug with as much emotion as I had given, possibly more. We each spent a few seconds taking deep, cleansing breaths, inhaling each other’s scent. She smelled so good, like honeysuckle. It made my mouth water and want to do other things that would have to wait. Tamping down the hot pool of desire, I stepped back slightly.

Her full, pouty lips were inches from mine, and I couldn’t resist. I followed through on Alexa’s command and kissed her gently. And shit, was it a kiss. This woman was all fire when it came to sexuality. She burned me from the inside out, the kiss only serving to inflame the desire I had just suppressed. She grabbed my face between her hands, holding me in place as

she devoured me. She tasted just as good as she smelled, and I couldn't get enough. She nipped at my lower lip, sucked on it hard enough to tighten my core, and then proceeded to wrap one of her hands around my waist, pulling me flush against her body. It felt like heaven, and I wanted nothing more than to repeat what we'd done last night. She had more control though and gave me one final gentle peck on the side of my mouth, then took a small step back. My body leaned forward as if to follow her, but I caught myself before I could grab her again to continue the foreplay.

“Shit, now I need a cold shower. That was hot as fuck, Don. Can we stay an extra night so I can work the itch you guys just gave me?” Alexa sounded more like her normal self.

I hadn't blushed since I was a teenager, but at that moment, my body chose to become bashful, and a rosy hue spread across my face.

“Oh my gods, are you blushing?” Laughter rang throughout the room. Mara was looking at me like I had grown horns as laughter spilled from her lips.

Looking at each of my friends, I grinned sheepishly and found Rhiannon's gorgeous eyes sparkling with mirth. Gods, she was perfection. My heart throbbed, with a good ache this time. I'd found something special, and I wasn't going to let it go, ever. I didn't know her, but we had time for that. My soul knew her as a match and that was all that mattered.

The door to Athene's office burst open suddenly. The only male in our group stormed out. He wouldn't look at me, which again hurt, and walked past us to the hallway that led out of the establishment.

“What the fuck, Lysander?” Alexa followed behind him. “You know, you're a real prick.”

He stopped abruptly and looked over his shoulder at her. The look could have incinerated Alexa on the spot, but as a fire Fae, she wasn't fazed by it.

I tried to stop caring that he was acting like a real asshole, even though on the inside I was slowly dying. I had to



maintain a mask of indifference. But something compelled me to go to him. I could feel his pain alongside mine through the bond. I walked slowly up to him, and he turned fully to face me. I could see that his pupils were round yet there was a soft blue glow ringing them, telling me I was speaking to both Lysander and his dragon. I wanted them to know that I wasn't playing this hurtful game anymore. He'd made his choice, and I had to live with it. Sometime between the pirate attack and last night, I realized I didn't want what he wanted anymore. My soul yearned for his, but he needed to want it as much as me. I would never force him to do something that he wasn't ready or willing to.

I was only a foot away from him, and I could feel the warmth coming off him in waves. I wanted to burrow into that heat and stay there forever. I could still feel Rhiannon behind me, and the bond was steady and pulsing with encouragement. She approved of me reaching out to him. As if my body had its own agenda, I reached out and placed my hand over his heart, and he flinched, visibly. I started to pull back, but then thought better of it. I needed to find a way to live with this pain. Maybe this was the first step. Railing against him for what happened or the decisions we'd both made wouldn't do anyone any good.

His face showed no emotion, a blank mask that frustrated me. But I could feel his emotional turmoil through our frayed bond. He wanted me as desperately as I wanted him—and it wasn't just his dragon but Lysander who wanted me. I don't know how I distinguished between the two, but I could.

We stood this way for a long time, my head craning far back to maintain eye contact. I could feel his heart racing at first then calming to synchronize with mine. He didn't touch me, but his hands were fisted at his sides, like he was keeping a leash on himself. My body yearned for him like nothing else. The bond was pushing us to seal our fate. I looked at my hand resting gently on his chest and leaned forward to rest my forehead next to it. I inhaled his scent just like I had with Rhiannon. It comforted me, made me feel like I was home. Then I felt him rest his chin on my head and do the same. He needed this as much as I did.

We stood in silence with my head and hand on his chest, and I felt the bond heal a bit. Realizing what was happening, he finally reached out and took my hand in his. He gripped it tightly but not painfully. Looking up into his eyes, I saw the dragon had receded and I was looking at Lysander. There was real anguish in his gaze. He brought my hand up and kissed my palm with such gentleness that a tear fell from my right eye. He followed its trail down my cheek and then leaned down, and I closed my eyes as he kissed my cheek and thus my pain away.

He had immense control, because he stepped back after that gentle caress and gazed at my face, tracking my brow, eyes, cheekbones and finally stopping at my lips. His hands shook as he reached out and traced my face in the same pattern. I held my breath, not wanting this moment to end. Rhiannon was sharing her happiness at what was occurring through the bond, warming me with her affection and approval. The bond with Lysander felt different, and still not complete. He was still holding back. That sent a spear of frustration through me, but I pushed it back. I wouldn't let it ruin this moment.

He explored my face softly, tenderly with his fingertips, like he was committing them to memory. My eyes were still closed, reveling in the sensations he was triggering. He placed his lips on my forehead, then crushed me to him with such abandon that my breath whooshed out of my lungs. "Surprise" was not a word that would have described what I felt in that moment; joy, elation, love even came to mind, but none of them did it justice.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and held on for dear life. Maybe, just maybe, we were getting past the bond roadblock. My soul sang as he held on to me as if our lives depended on it. I burrowed my face in his chest, again inhaling his scent until it was embedded in my memory. He did the same, and I could feel him taking in huge lungfuls of my essence as we held each other fiercely. I wanted to melt into him, and my heart felt like it would burst from the feelings his response evoked in me.

“We must go, little one. There is much to do, and we are running out of time.” His voice penetrated my entire being, spreading wonderful tingles throughout my body. “We’ll work through this, but not here in this place where everyone can hear.”

Nodding my assent, I leaned back and blinked my eyes open. He was looking directly at me, his eyes no longer glowing but full of a deep emotion I couldn’t name. “Okay, let’s get out of here.”

Raising on my tiptoes, I took a chance that he’d be willing to kiss me. It was a bold move, especially when I really didn’t know why he’d changed his mind or whether it would last. His face was set in tense lines, then his brows dropped low, and he leaned down. I closed my eyes as he brushed his lips against mine, then I felt his tongue lick the seam of my lips and I opened up.

The fire that raged through me was all-consuming. I moved my arms from his waist to his neck, grabbing a fistful of his hair to hold him in place. His hands were around my waist and under my ass in moments, pulling me up to straddle him. Our mouths fused together, tongues licking, tasting and playing with each other in a dance of pure unadulterated need. I could feel him rock hard against the apex of my thighs, making me wetter than I’d ever been. In this moment, he was all that I wanted, and I didn’t care who bore witness.

Of course, he had more restraint than I did and pulled his face back slightly, staring into my eyes with pure wonder. I could feel our frayed bond healing, becoming whole again. The pain of the last few weeks lessening. But most of all, I felt complete in his arms, just like when Rhiannon was nearby. He licked my bottom lip, nipping it slightly, making me moan out loud, ready to tear his clothes off and show him how much I wanted him on my knees. Just thinking about his cock in my mouth made it water. Giving myself a mental shake, I took a deep breath and focused on him. “Later, we’ll finish this later,” was all I could get out.

Smirking, he nodded and set me down on my feet. I wobbled slightly, but he held my elbow to keep me steady.

After a few seconds, I turned to look at my friends, who all had shit-eating grins on their faces, including Rhiannon. Not embarrassed in the least, I took Lysander's hand in mine, looked back at him to make sure things hadn't changed once again and, finding confirmation that we were good, set off down the hall to exit Athene's establishment.

On the way out, we happened to see the Fae male that Lysander almost killed walking out of another room. He took one look in our direction, turned and walked back into the room. Lysander stiffened next to me; a low, angry rumble emerged from his chest. I wrapped my arms tightly around his left arm, hoping he wouldn't react physically to the male. All we needed was for him to attack the poor guy again. Athene would do worse than just fine us.

"I should tear him limb from limb and make him eat his own cock." His words were barely intelligible, but I caught what he said. My eyes widened.

Just then, Rhiannon came alongside him and kept us moving forward. "It will never happen again, brother. I promise you. Our mate is ours and no one else's." She turned to face him as we neared the doors. She looked at me next and waited.

"She's right, Lysander. I didn't know what our bond meant until Rhiannon and Athene explained." I paused, trying to find the right words. "It won't happen again, ever."

Rhiannon smiled gently, then turned her attention to Lysander. Alexa, Mara, Solara and Leanne had already walked around us and waited outside in the street. We could see the late-morning sun filtering through the doorway. We had spent a good portion of our day here and needed to get moving. But Lysander needed to know that I would keep my word. I was afraid to know what he felt, but I put on my big-girl trousers and looked up into his beautiful cobalt-blue eyes.

He stood motionless, stiff as a board, and I suspected he was having an inner battle with his dragon. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. "No one but your mates touch you ever again, Donyale. My dragon wants to kill that male

whose just for being in the same room as you. I don't ever want to know what happened, only that you will be loyal and faithful to your mates. Dragons don't share, not like wolves and griffons do, and it's hard enough for me to allow other mates near you. If other males take an interest and are bold enough to try and follow through, I won't be able to—nor would I want to—hold my dragon back from razing everything they hold dear to the ground.”

My heart was beating fast. *Burning everything to the ground?* I looked at Rhiannon and she nodded her head slightly, meaning he could and would do it. Shit. But that didn't matter—I'd never let it happen again as long as Lysander and I were past the severing-of-bond crap. “It won't happen again. I just want you and Rhiannon.”

My hand cupped his left cheek, feeling the stubble from a day's worth of beard sprouting. He once again speared me with his eyes, trying to gauge the truth of my words. I tried to send warmth and acceptance through the bond. I wasn't sure if I was successful, but a moment later he nodded and grabbed ahold of my hand. Rhiannon walked around Lysander and came up beside me, taking my other hand. Feeling whole for the first time in months, we stepped out into the street to begin our journey to Skolos.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It took us three more days to gather everything, including the arsenal of weapons we'd need given we now knew we'd be hunted. We were on the fifth day of our journey, slogging through dense jungle. Jaron and Soryn joined us to offer more protection. They were a quite the pair, but that wasn't why Lysander had chosen to them to accompany him on his journey. They were the best of the best of their elite warrior unit—large, broad and all muscle. I was a bit shocked when I saw them strap all their weapons on as we entered the jungle. They had kept a low profile before then, looking like big but normal men. Now they looked like they'd take your head off just for looking at them the wrong way.

I was glad they were on our side. Solara and Alexa had taken a shine to them, the horn dogs. The males were all business, though. No amount of charm that Solara exhibited on them worked. Alexa's curves didn't so much as raise an eyebrow, or anything else for that matter. They were the definition of discipline. To say my friends were disappointed would be an understatement. They gave up after several days of trying and getting no response. Out of respect for our party, I kept my interactions with Rhiannon and Lysander purely conversational apart from some innocent touching. We held hands and hugged, but that was it. My friends thought I was crazy for not taking advantage of having two mates, but I didn't want to make things uncomfortable for everyone. I knew that following through on any sort of sexual act could make things more tense within the group.

We trudged along in a single-file line, Lysander in the front with me, Rhiannon, Leanne, Solara, Alexa and Mara following him. Soryn and Jaron covered our backs. Lysander had told us that as dragons, they could have flown and taken only a few days to reach Skolos, but their vow not to shift unless there was a life-or-death situation still applied. I much preferred the water to this hellhole. The air was so humid that you could see it weighing down on us. And the bugs—the bane of our current existence—attacked us night and day. We got in the habit of covering ourselves up from head to toe to avoid being a primary food source for the fuckers.

None of them bit the dragons, but maybe it was because they could sense the predator beneath their skin. Mara initially tried to help with her earth magic, but all it did was keep the insects away for small periods of time. Leanne got into the habit of mixing herbs and having us rub them all over our bodies. That helped quite a bit; the insects seemed repelled by whatever she put in the mixture. To be fair, it smelled awful and probably would have repelled any living creature. The dragons seemed especially sensitive to it, and they kept their distance, even Lysander.

It had been a while since we'd bathed, and we were all ready to end this nightmare of a journey and get to Skolos. It had been uneventful so far, just nature taking its toll. The jungle was always filled with different sounds, music almost. It never ended, regardless of what time of day it was. It was annoying at first, but after getting used to it, it became a comfort.

The sounds of the jungle stopped abruptly, and we all froze at the same time. Lysander held his hand up, telling us to remain where we were and stay silent. We all took defensive stances. For several moments, nothing happened. Then the jungle came alive. It moved like a sentient being intent on causing us as much harm as possible.

Vines with thorns that were as long as our fingers came for us, striking at our faces, our vulnerable areas, like our eyes. I couldn't see what was happening with my friends because we were surrounded on all four sides by walls of thick vegetation.

We were sliced to ribbons immediately, bleeding through our clothes in seconds. They were superficial cuts but stung like a motherfucker.

“Mara, can you contain it?” Solara screamed above the howling wind.

I immediately tried to control it, but it was like wrestling a sea serpent. Sweat broke out on my forehead from defending my body from the slashing foliage, beating back the vines that kept trying to wrap around me and trying to calm the wind that had become a full-blown windstorm.

Mara yelled something in response to Solara, but it was lost in the wind. Lysander and Rhiannon were on either side of me, trying to shield me from the attack. Whatever this was, it was strong, stronger than anything I’d experienced before. It took all we had to defend ourselves from the writhing mass that was the jungle.

Lysander moved with graceful sweeps of his sword, cutting anything that got too close to me. He was so fast that I could barely track him with my eyes. Rhiannon had her deep indigo bow and arrow; shadows danced toward her, and I realized she was calling dead souls to her. They came from the thick foliage surrounding us, swarming toward her at her bidding and forming a wall of protection on all sides. But her bow—oh, it made her look so majestic—it glowed and seemed to absorb any light that came near it. It was her conduit of power.

Gaining a bit of space, Lysander pulled up next to me, breathing hard. “This won’t hold for long. The jungle is responding to something manipulating earth magic. Whatever it is, it’s extremely powerful. We need to find the source.”

“No need, I’m here.” A deep, masculine voice vibrated through the canopy of demented plants. “Give me Donyale and the rest of you may go.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Rhiannon snarled over Lysander’s rage-filled growl.



“Who are you?” I shouted. Maybe if we got some information from them, we could figure out how to get out of this mess.

“I’m a friend of your dear old dad. He wants to see you. He wants to get to know his precious daughter.” His sardonic voice was coming from every direction, so we couldn’t pinpoint where he was standing. “Come to me and your friends shall live.”

I noticed he’d said nothing about mates. Was it possible he didn’t know?

“Show yourself!” Lysander’s voice was like crushed gravel, but it traveled well enough.

“I don’t think so. You have ten seconds to comply, or your friends will die.”

Feeling panic rising in my chest, I turned to Lysander and Rhiannon, both of whom looked grim. Rhiannon was the first to speak. “He’ll kill us anyway. There’s no way he’d leave us alive to track and get you back.”

Musical laughter echoed all around us, not at all what an evil laugh should sound like. I could still hear my friends fighting a short distance away from me. They seemed to be holding their own, but I couldn’t see them due to the wall of vegetation separating us. Indecision warred within me. I knew Rhiannon was right—but if I left with this person and he kept his word and spared them, they’d still have a chance to find me.

“No.” Lysander was staring at me, and I knew he could interpret what I was thinking from my facial expression. “We won’t be separated.”

“Time is up!”

A vicious scream ripped through the air, and it sounded like Alexa.

“Wait wait wait!” I cried. The screaming stopped. “If I leave with you, will you promise to leave my friends unharmed?”

Silence greeted my question.

“Donyale, you can’t trust this thing, whatever it is,” Rhiannon pleaded.

“Well, I can promise that *most* of your friends will be left unharmed.” He sounded triumphant, the bastard.

Lysander chose that moment to lose his fucking shit. His dragon had had enough apparently, because he started shifting. Brilliant, beautiful colors exploded from his body, hiding the shift, and Rhiannon and I were forced to move away from him quickly. He changed with a massive roar that shook the ground. Two more vicious-sounding roars filled the space, forcing Rhiannon and me to cover our ears. She still had her bow at the ready, shining an indigo so dark, it was black.

As Lysander rose to his full height, the jungle resumed the attack. Vines made a beeline for him, trying to hook their thorns into his hide, and it took everything Rhiannon and I had to keep them from reaching him. My training had never been so welcome as today.

We worked in tandem; she used her bow and arrow to kill the vines at their roots, whipping arrow after arrow with ease and no sign of tiring, like a true huntress. The shadows gravitating to her grew and grew and grew. She was pulling a lot of her power to try and save us. I danced with my sword, cutting anything that got too close. Lysander was unwilling to leave my side, so he fought on the ground, tearing trees up by their roots to create more room for us to fight off the attack. Dragons were best at aerial fighting and the close confines of the jungle made him less effective, but it didn’t seem to be slowing him down that much. He was intent on finding our attacker, clearing large areas of vegetation to locate him. I couldn’t hear past our dome, but I hoped that my friends were okay. Alexa’s pain-filled scream had shaken me to my core.

The fight was pure chaos. Our attacker had infinite ammunition to pull from in this dense jungle. We wouldn’t last much longer if we didn’t come up with a plan. As I was hacking away at the attacking vines, I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I started to turn around, only to feel

someone grab hold of me from behind. Startled, I tried to break their hold but then felt a finger on my forehead and power pushed deep into my consciousness. I heard Lysander's anguished roar and Rhiannon's scream vibrate through me. I tried to fight off the magic but it was too strong, and the only thing I could think of was my mates and my friends as a blanket of darkness overtook me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I woke with a start. Looking around, I first made note that I was in some sort of cabin. There was a large fireplace with a cheery fire crackling at one end of the room. Opposite it was a small kitchen with a table and two chairs. There was a staircase that led to a separate space, what seemed like a loft. Looking down, I saw a quilt covering me—I was wearing night clothes. I couldn't remember how I'd gotten here or where I'd been beforehand.

“Hello, my love.” The door opened to reveal a man coming in from the freezing cold. He was covered head to toe in furs, so it was hard to make out his features. The brisk, icy wind penetrated the cozy interior, making me shiver.

“Apologies, I know it's cold, dove. A blizzard is blowing in and I needed to secure the animals.”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

He took off several layers of furs and placed them on a peg by the door to dry. His back was to me, but the first thing I noticed was that he was tall—very tall—broad-shouldered and had golden hair with dark streaks threaded throughout. He turned and I caught my breath. He was beautiful, like, fairytale beautiful. He smiled and the entire room lit up, me included. But who was he?

“Is everything alright?” His face transformed into one of pure concern.

I didn't speak. I had no idea if I was alright. I tried to remember where I was, and there was a blank space in my

memory. I shook my head, and he took that to mean I wasn't alright. And I guess I wasn't.

"You took a nasty fall yesterday. The physician said you may have some challenges remembering, but he told me it would be temporary." He walked toward me slowly so as not to startle me.

Feeling like my space was being invaded, I scooted as far back as I could on the small mattress I'd woken up on.

He stopped on seeing my reaction and took several steps back. "Once the storm passes, I'll get the physician to take another look at you now that you're awake. How much do you remember?" His voice was musical, gentle and non-threatening. But something inside of me was warning me to stay away from him.

"I remember nothing. Who are you?"

Surprise flickered across his face, quickly followed by sadness. "I am your mate, Donovan. We were mated over ten years ago. Don't you remember me?"

Shaking my head, knowing this couldn't be right, I said nothing in response.

"Maybe some food will help with remembering. I brought duck, your favorite." He smiled tentatively.

Still staying silent, I watched him gracefully walk to the kitchen and begin preparing our meal. Something inside me was telling me that this was wrong, but I couldn't remember anything. Focusing inward, I tried to think of small things that would help me gain some semblance of orientation. For a few minutes, nothing came to mind, and then real panic set in: I couldn't remember my name!

There was complete blankness when I tried to remember anything. I couldn't even remember this man that claimed to be my mate. Hands shaking, I pushed the quilt off me and swung my legs over the side of the bed. Hearing me move, he turned and immediately walked over to me, tucking me back in. He was gentle, but firm.

“The physician said you need to stay off your feet for a few days. I don’t want you to relapse, my love.” His kind smile eased something inside me that was tied up in knots. “I’ll bring you your meal once it’s ready. For now, rest.”

I nodded in acquiescence, and he gracefully walked back to the kitchen and resumed cooking. I took this time to examine him. He moved like a predator, light of foot and smooth. He wore a form-fitting shirt and pants that accentuated his physique. Strong, supple muscles showed underneath, clearly demonstrating his active lifestyle. He wasn’t brawny or bulky, but lean and lithe. The question was, why was there nothing stirring inside me at the sight of him? If he was my mate, wouldn’t I be more physically attracted to him?

Deciding to change the view, I looked around the cabin again. It was well made and well insulated from the cold. I could hear the wind picking up and blasting against the exterior walls, but none of it leaked through. The cabin was clean, neat and well-maintained. There were small items that added a more feminine touch to the ambiance. I guess, if I were to believe what he said, I must have created these items. They were very artistic, which meant I must have a creative streak. The quilt was also beautifully handmade, so maybe I’d made that, too?

I could smell the duck cooking and my mouth watered. I hadn’t realized I was so hungry. Just then, Donovan walked over to me with a steaming cup of what looked like tea. Handing it to me, he smiled even though I could see he was worrying about me.

Suddenly, my stomach decided it was time for everyone to know how empty it was, and it growled loudly. Donovan straightened and his smile widened. “I guess I’d better get to that meal, huh?” He winked and walked back to continue cooking.

I hid my embarrassment by sipping on the tea, which was delicious. My focus now completely on drinking this hot lovely drink, I didn’t hear Donovan’s question. Looking up, I

thought I caught an expression of annoyance flit across his face, but it was too fast for me to be sure.

“Are you in any pain?” the question came again.

“Oh, no, just wish I could remember,” I told him.

“What *do* you remember?” Donovan asked as he continued cooking, his back to me.

“Nothing. I remember nothing.” Frustratingly, it was true. I tried not to panic. What would happen if I didn’t recover my memories?

“The physician said it could happen, but it should be temporary. You should start getting your memories back once you fully recover from the fall. He said it’s your mind’s way of protecting itself. Not sure what that means, but he assured me you’ll get your memory back.” He sounded so sure that my anxiety eased a bit. If I couldn’t remember, then maybe Donovan could tell me more about us and that would trigger a memory.

“How did we meet?” I asked him.

He turned to me in surprise, but then he smiled and it was like a thousand suns hit me. Feeling a little stunned, I almost missed his response. “We met at a fair. I was there selling furs and you were there selling your home crafts and décor. I was walking by your stall and noticed you were having trouble grabbing one of your quilts you’d somehow placed on the highest shelf and now couldn’t reach. Rather than watch you struggle, I offered to help. You jumped like a startled deer and looked at me with the biggest, most beautiful eyes I’d ever seen, stunning me in my tracks. You politely but firmly told me, ‘No,’ then proceeded to continue to stretch and jump at the quilt. I asked how you’d gotten it up there in the first place. You responded that it was your idiot brother who put it there and probably did so intentionally just to piss you off.

“I thought that maybe you were right. But I couldn’t be mad at your brother for it. I stopped to help you because of it, insisted on it until you finally relented. I stepped to where you stood and our arms brushed and that was it. Our bond clicked

into place, and the rest is history.” He laughed softly, I guess happy at remembering our meeting. Nothing he said rang a bell for me. My mind was still a blank canvas, only remembering the few things that had occurred after I awoke.

“We were fully mated a year later. Your father was extremely protective and felt we needed to get to know each other before sealing the mating bond. I didn’t mind. I thought it a bit old-fashioned, and so did you, but it wasn’t a great sacrifice to wait.” He brought over a tray of food for me. The smell was divine. I could see duck, glazed carrots and roasted potatoes. It all looked so good that my mouth immediately watered.

“Here you go. I know you’re hungry, so it’s best if you eat while I talk. Does that sound okay?” He gently placed the tray on my lap, holding it steady while I placed my still-warm cup of tea on the tray.

Picking up a fork, I sampled the duck. Its wonderful flavor exploded in my mouth. It was so good that I closed my eyes and moaned out loud. Donovan barked out a laugh, enjoying me enjoying the food he’d made me. I opened my eyes and saw his laughing eyes gazing at me tenderly. Swallowing the food in my mouth, I smiled at him. “Thank you, this is wonderful!”

He nodded his head once, then went to grab his own tray. He sat across from me and talked my ear off about how we’d met, where we decided to make a home, about how we visited my family twice a year when we went to the fair. We’d been married for three years with no children and, not wanting to make things uncomfortable, I left it alone. He shared that we were wolf shifters and belonged to his pack, which lived high in the mountains. They were dire wolves, a very large breed of wolf shifter. I was a blue wolf shifter, apparently. Smaller than the dire wolf, but not by much. My pack hailed from a neighboring mountain village and had an alliance with his pack.

He talked throughout dinner and even when my eyes started drooping. He stood, took my tray and then helped me walk to use the facilities before going to bed. There was a



mirror in the bathroom where I looked at myself for the first time since waking. My dark mahogany-colored hair was in a thick neat braid that hung down to the middle of my back. Even though I had a dusky tone, I looked pale, and could see that my face was a sicklier shade of golden brown. I had dark circles under my eyes, as if I hadn't slept in ages. My eyes swallowed my face, which overall looked thin and a bit sallow. Perhaps this fall had done more damage than I thought. I did look pretty bad. After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I exited the bathroom, only to see Donovan leaning against the opposite wall. He was waiting for me. I felt warmth seep through my limbs at his care.

He was kind, gentle, beautiful, just what any woman would want. He cared for me, that was clear. Possibly loved me even, which made my guilt rise to the surface. I felt nothing for him. Not a spark of heat or a strong emotion like love or anything that would signify that he was my mate. There was something in me that kept tugging, perhaps the bond trying to reconnect with him. Walking gingerly over to him, I took his extended hand and gripped it tight. I would give myself time, and hopefully my memory and the feelings we had for each other would come back.

He led me back to my bed, tucking me in so I was warm within seconds. He placed his hand on my head and rubbed his thumb along my forehead. His full lips were in line with my eyes. He whispered something I didn't catch and then leaned down and gave me a kiss. His lips were warm, nice. I kissed him back, thinking it was what I should do given he was my mate. It felt strange. He licked the seam of my lips and I tentatively opened up. He delved into my mouth, not aggressively, but firmly. Almost like he was trying to mark me as his. The kiss was good but didn't feel right. My body didn't react at the contact, making me feel a different kind of anxiety. I reached up and put my hands on his shoulders, which were heavily muscled. He felt nice, but there was still something missing.

Pulling back slightly, I ended the kiss. The heat emanating from his eyes told me he wanted to continue. His pupils were expanded, and his lips swollen from our kiss. I wanted to feel

more than that bit of warmth for him. It could be that I was tired and any other day I would feel the passion that should rise from touching and kissing your mate.

I cupped his face and softly leaned up and gave him a chaste kiss. “I should rest. I’m still feeling off and want to get back to normal as soon as possible.”

He placed his forehead against mine, then shifted so his face was nestled against my neck and took several moments to inhale my scent. At least that’s what I thought he was doing. By now, he was practically laying down with me, body flush against mine, curving alongside my nooks and crannies. His arm came around my waist, holding me tightly to him. Somehow, it made me feel more uncomfortable.

Trying not show my discomfort, I shifted so my back was to his front and allowed him to pull me against his chest. I told myself this was normal. He was still fully clothed and wasn’t doing anything other than hugging me. I could feel his breath on my neck, his heartbeat drumming a consistent staccato against my shoulder blades. His breathing evened out in what I thought was sleep, and eventually, I closed my eyes and did the same.



I WOKE UP WITH HIS ARMS STILL CRADLING ME LOOSELY. IT took several moments to recall where I was and why I was here. I remembered everything that had happened yesterday, yet my other memories still escaped me. There were things right at the edge of my consciousness, but I couldn’t grasp them. I lay there trying to remember and kept coming up against a wall. I could see in my mind’s eye that there were memories just out of reach, but inaccessible. Sighing in frustration, I peeked over my shoulder and caught Donovan’s gaze. Apparently, he’d been awake for a while because his eyes were alert.

“Good morning, my love. Did you sleep well?” His velvety voice slid through me. Maybe something was coming

back because my body was reacting to him where it wasn't yesterday. Turning to face him, I noticed that he was under the covers with me, and that his chest was bare. He was built like a god, all golden skin and rippling muscles. My gaze roamed all over the skin that was exposed, which ended low at his waist. I didn't have to guess at what I couldn't see because I could feel it. He was hard as stone, and it was pressed right up between my thighs. The feel of it sent heat straight to my core, but something felt off.

Confused, I pulled away a bit. "I did, thank you. I need to use the bathroom. Would you help me up?" I looked over at him and caught his self-satisfied smirk. He knew what I'd been thinking the entire time I was ogling him. Feeling my cheeks warm, I turned away as he stood up. Keeping my eyes down, I turned and scooted to the edge of the bed and swung my legs over the side of it. Except he was already there, crouched down in front of me. He reached over and rubbed my right knee.

"It's okay, it's natural to feel physical need for your mate. You know this." He said it softly, but there was hurt in his tone. Glancing up, I made eye contact with him and got lost in his eyes for a moment. They were so clear and full of understanding that I decided to give myself a firm shake. He was my mate; I had nothing to feel embarrassed about. My body was just recognizing what my mind had forgotten. It was instinctual, right?

Nodding at his words, I leaned forward and gave him a small kiss on the corner of his mouth and grabbed his hands to help steady me. My legs still felt a bit wobbly, so I had to lean on him until I felt well enough to carry my own weight. He put on a thick robe and helped me into a matching one my size. I was grateful because I had lost the warmth of the quilt as soon as I stood up, and my body hadn't appreciated it.

We walked together to the bathroom where I entered first and performed my morning routine—or what I thought was my routine, given I did it without thinking. That was a good sign, right? Stepping out, I found him lounging against the opposite wall, looking like morning sunshine. He gave me a

sexy smile that did a little something to my stomach, making me notice him a little differently than yesterday. I managed to walk out on my own and he only hovered next to me, giving me space to do this on my own two feet.

By the time I made it back to my bed I was feeling dizzy again, but before I could climb in he took the opportunity to gently grab my arm and guide me to a large, overstuffed chair instead. I sank into it and let out a small sigh of relief—the room wasn't spinning anymore. He covered me with a thick fur, which immediately warmed my extremities. I could still hear the sound of the wind lashing against the house.

“I guess the storm hasn't let up,” I told him.

“No, it'll be worse today than yesterday, but they usually only last a few days. We'll be safe and warm here. I need to change the bedding and start some breakfast. Will you be okay in the chair while I tend to that?”

I still had my eyes closed and his voice sounded like his lips were almost touching my ear. As I slowly blinked my eyes open, I found him leaning over me with a look of concern on his beautiful face. He was tracing every feature of my face with an emotion I couldn't name, but it warmed my heart. “I'll be fine. I think that short walk just disoriented me, considering I've been in bed for days. My body just needs to adjust.” At least that's what I thought it was.

He nodded yet didn't look convinced. Leaning back, he reached out with his right hand and cupped the left side of my face. It was a loving caress that squeezed my insides uncomfortably. I maintained a smooth expression, though, as he leaned in one more time and placed his lips on my forehead.

“I'll get breakfast started. It could be that you haven't had much to eat since you fell. Holler if you need me.” I was blasted by more sunshine as he gave me a wide smile.

“You got it.” My voice was hoarse, only making his smile widen.

I stayed quiet while he moved around in the other room. My memories were still too far out of reach, but I started to feel them, if that made any sense. I could feel that there was love and desire there, but no specific memories came to mind. I closed my eyes again and tried to remember. At first, there was nothing but a light-gray mist, almost like a blanket of fog, covering my past life. In my mind's eye, I walked into it, trying to sift through the dense material. I could see shapes and colors, but nothing was distinct. I stayed this way for several long minutes, trying to capture any memory that would hopefully tell me more about who I was.

I was still walking through the fog, not having had much success, when blazing cobalt orbs of light speared right through the haze, followed by what looked like the most beautiful black opal gems. I walked toward the objects in my mind's eye, absolutely certain there was something here I should be remembering. There was a sharp tug at my center, my bond reacting to what I'd seen. It wasn't painful, but it was so familiar. The sensations felt like I was coming home.

The cobalt orbs remained so bright that their light pushed the rest of the fog back. I tried to walk faster toward them, but the faster I ran, the farther away they became. I was certain this was related to my amnesia. I could feel it in my heart. I needed to get to that light. I pushed harder. I was almost there, memories starting to take shape as I drew closer, when they blinked out and the fog returned. Confused, I opened my eyes, only to see Donovan standing in front of me with a plate full of food.

His eyes were sharp, taking everything in. "Did you doze off?" There was something off about his voice, but I couldn't place it.

"Just resting a bit before I eat. That's all." I wasn't sure why I'd lied to him. It felt right to keep what I saw to myself.

Nodding, he placed a large cloth napkin on my lap and handed me the plate full of food. It smelled delightful and my mouth started to water just looking at it. I smiled my thanks. He waited until I took the first bite and, seeing my satisfaction with the meal, he walked back to the kitchen for his own plate.

We ate in silence, neither one of us having much to say, apparently. After practically licking my plate clean, he took our dishes to the kitchen and walked down the hallway. He came back with an armful of bedding.

“I can help, Donovan.” I moved to get up, but he rushed over to me and laid a hand on my shoulder.

“No, you take it easy. This is not a difficult task for me. I’ll be done in a flash.” His tone was firm, but gentle.

“Alright, but as soon as I feel back to normal, I’ll be helping around here. I don’t like being dead weight.” A little edge colored my voice, surprising me.

He raised his eyebrows at my tone and grinned. “Always so independent. It’s one of the reasons I fell in love with you.” He winked at my surprise and went back to his task.

Fiddling with the edge of the fur, I asked the one question that had been on my mind. “Why don’t we have children?” He stiffened as I finished my question, then continued to make the bed without answering right away. Thinking that he wouldn’t, I turned my mind back to the cobalt light and opal gems I’d seen in my memories.

“At first we decided to wait.” His voice startled me out of my musings. “More recently we decided that it was time to try. You were several months along when you fell and lost the baby.” His voice broke slightly at the end.

“What did you say?” I had meant for it to come out stronger than a thready whisper.

Turning toward me, I saw the pain bleeding through his eyes; it was almost palpable. My stomach began to hurt in earnest, then suddenly stopped.

“The physician tried to save the baby, but it was too late. He said we could try again once you recover from your fall.” He told me this with a strong voice, but his eyes betrayed him. He was devastated.

And me? I didn’t know what I felt. I thought I should feel the same pain as him, but I couldn’t remember being pregnant, much less the feelings I had for a child that no longer existed.

Confused and thinking something must be really wrong with me, I turned away from him and focused on the embers burning in the fireplace. I could feel him staring at my profile, waiting for a reaction. But I had none. I couldn't share in his grief because I hadn't lost anything—at least my memories told me I hadn't—so I wasn't going to pretend I'd lost something I didn't know I had.

He knelt in front of me, pain-filled eyes scrutinizing my face, trying to read me. “Do you remember nothing about it?” It came out accusatory, but I know he didn't mean it that way. At least, I thought he didn't.

“I...I can't remember anything,” I whispered softly. “I wish I did because it feels like I'm cut off from all emotion except frustration from not having access to my life before these past couple of days. I don't even know how to process what you've just told me. I don't *feel* the loss, not like you do. I'm sorry I can't share in this grief of losing our child. It feels like it happened to someone else.” I laid it all out there for him to interpret. He didn't look upset, or disappointed, or anything for that matter. It was like a mask fell into place, blocking every telltale sign of the emotions he must have felt.

We stared at each other in silence. When he spoke, it was with more formality than before, though there was still kindness in his tone. “I understand. I'll finish up here and let you rest. Maybe with a little time to reflect, you'll start to remember.” He got up and finished making the bed. He walked over to the entryway and started layering on clothes to go out.

“Where are you going?” The panic came through in my question. He was leaving me in the middle of a blizzard?

“I need to get a few items from our stores to replenish what we've eaten. Don't worry, I won't be far, and it'll only take me a few minutes to get it. Do you need anything before I step out?”

“I don't think so. Be careful.” I didn't want him thinking that I wasn't touched, didn't care about what he'd just shared.

“Don’t worry about me. I grew up on this mountain, this is gentle weather compared to the winter.” He smiled brilliantly and finished putting on his layers. I kept my eyes on him until he was ready to step out. Bracing myself for the wind that was sure to come, I still jerked in surprise at the ice-cold wind that slapped me in the face as he opened the door and quickly stepped out, shutting it behind him.

He was gone for about an hour when I started to feel a tingle all over my body. It wasn’t unpleasant but it was strange. It was like static electricity right before a storm hits. The sensation lasted for approximately ten minutes, and I started to worry that something had happened to him. Another ten minutes passed before I became sure of it. Suddenly, the door burst open with a freezing blast of wind, and he was inside the house with a bag full of goods. He stomped the snow off his boots and then proceeded to put the bag down on the floor. I moved to help him, but he waved me off.

It took no time for him to strip off his layers and hang up the wet clothes. He rushed over and knelt in front of me. “I was saving this for our anniversary, but I figure now is as good a time as any.”

He pulled out a small pouch and handed it to me. Curious, I took it, opened the draw string and looked inside. What I saw took my breath away. I turned the bag upside down over my left palm and spilled its contents. A gold bracelet studded with rubies and diamonds landed in my hand. Large, clear stones reflected the firelight, and if you angled the bracelet just right, their brilliance flashed like starlight. I was speechless, stunned by its beauty.

“Do you like it?” he asked with a hopeful tone.

“It’s magnificent. I love it.” I couldn’t hide my admiration for this piece of jewelry. He then reached out and secured it on my wrist. Immediately, I saw something in my mind’s eye, a vision: Donovan and I standing together looking out over a beautiful stretch of snowcapped mountains covered in evergreens, and at their base a large clear lake surrounded by neat homes.



Donovan pulled me back from the vision. “Are you okay, my love?”

“I think I remember.” I blinked several times to clear the image from my mind while tears ran down my cheeks. *I remember!*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Weeks went by and the memories slowly returned. Donovan was being very deliberate about our connection. He touched me, but not intimately. We kissed plenty, but no further. It was good that he didn't push it because every time we were getting closer to intimacy, something within me kept pushing him away. It didn't feel right, and my mind kept drifting back to those cobalt and opal lights, threads that I couldn't release. I thought something was wrong with me, so when the physician came to check on me the second week after my fall, I asked him if hallucinations could result from my injury. He looked at me strangely, glanced around the room and said they could possibly happen immediately after the fall, if the mind was trying to heal itself. Every injury to the head was different, he said, but not to worry because I was healing nicely.

He left soon after, saying something about visiting a village that had a sickness spreading through it. I nodded absent-mindedly and thought about what he said. Maybe it was all just in my imagination, something conjured to help me deal with the injury. Putting it out of mind, I focused on regaining my *real* memories. Living with Donovan was an experience. We worked to stock up for the winter during the day. He said I was an excellent hunter, so we would go out together several times a week to find game that we could salt and store in our icebox. The time we spent together didn't teach me much more about Donovan other than he was in his element when hunting. Almost like he'd been born for it. But

then, he said he was a wolf shifter, like me, so it made sense we were extremely skilled at it.

I hadn't felt my wolf since the fall. The physician said that would change as I healed, but I found it strange that I didn't feel like a shifter. Or rather, what I thought a shifter should feel like. Donovan eased my concerns by distracting me, giving me more work to do or kissing me, which only initiated other concerns, like why my body didn't feel anything. Whenever he touched me, it felt wrong.

On the fourth week, Donovan started to act differently. He was sharper with me, impatient even. I wasn't sure what had changed, but I thought that if I tried harder to respond to his touch, that he'd stop acting like he was disappointed in me. I wanted to feel more, I really did, but I couldn't. My lackluster responses frustrated him.

Then the day came when everything changed. He woke up angry, and it kept escalating all day. I stayed out of his way, sticking to doing my chores efficiently and quietly. But it didn't help. He would find a way to approach me about this or that, and every time, he'd roughly grope me, kissing me hard. I didn't fight him, because I knew it was me creating this barrier between us. I pretended to have the same passion, but he knew it was fabricated. My sternum would warm with wonderful feeling and I'd think, *Finally, the bond is coming to life*. But then it faded. Discouraged, I stopped responding to Donovan's attentions.

"What the fuck?" He was breathing hard after a particularly passionate kiss. He was rock-hard against me. I could feel his cock against my belly, ready and eager to continue. My body was repelled by it, but I stood still, not wanting him to see.

"I'm tired of waiting for you to figure it out. I need you *now*." He grabbed my ass and lifted me onto the table behind me. I grasped onto his shoulders to steady myself. I was getting more and more nervous as he flung my shirt over my head and greedily looked at my breasts. He dipped and took one nipple into his mouth, sucking hard, almost painfully. I leaned back and away from him, but he held me still so he

could feast on me like a starving man. It was uncomfortable and my stomach cramped painfully in disgust. I didn't want to do this, but he was my husband and had been patient with me for weeks.

I let him continue his rough attentions to my breasts. He sucked painfully, rubbing and pinching where his mouth wasn't. My breathing picked up, though out of discomfort and fear, not passion. He must have mistaken my reaction for excitement because then he started unfastening his pants, freeing his cock. I panicked at the sight of it: it was long and thick, with a center vein throbbing in arousal.

He wrapped his hand around it and started stroking, then grabbed my hand and guided it to his member. I wrapped my fingers around it gently and allowed him to guide my hand up and down at the rhythm he enjoyed. I felt his other hand around my neck, squeezing lightly. It made my breath hitch, but not for a good reason. His aggression was palpable. He continued to guide me with his hand on his cock while he sucked and nibbled on my nipples. The nibbles turned to bites, the first of which made me gasp out loud. He chuckled, thinking I enjoyed it, and got rougher. His cock was rock hard, like stone in my hands, when he pulled away and ripped my trousers off—literally tearing them in two. They lay in tatters around me, the only fabric left intact still clinging to my legs. I didn't know how he'd done it, but I was sitting there, bare to him.

He stood back, and the expression on his face was anything but loving. It was feral, his face was all sharp angles, nothing like the beautiful creature I saw when I first opened my eyes after the injury, or in my memories. I could have sworn I saw incisors peeking out of his mouth, but it must have been my imagination running wild.

My heart picked up. This wasn't normal. I knew in my gut that something was wrong. I was very still; as with any predator, any motion could trigger a violent reaction. He perused my body, lingering at my throat for several long beats before traveling down to my abused breasts and then stopping

at my core. He looked at it like it was his salvation with single-minded purpose.

He moved so fast it was a blur. One second he was standing about five feet away; the next, he was at my throat. I felt hot, piercing pain for several long seconds, and then it turned to liquid pleasure. He pulled on my artery hard, sucking my blood. I was shocked, freaked out and fighting the pleasure of the bite all at once. He was a fucking vampire! What the all fuck?

I placed my hands on his shoulders and tried to fight him, but he was latched on tight and immovable. I tried squirming out of his arms, but that was no use. He had me locked in, one hand holding the back of my head in a viselike grip and the other around my waist, ensuring I couldn't wiggle out of his grasp.

He took one long drag, detached his mouth from my neck and tipped his head back, and with closed eyes savored the taste of my blood. He almost looked like he was high on a drug. I took the opportunity to push violently against him while he was distracted by the taste of me. That was a mistake; he immediately focused on me again. Only this time, he wanted more than just blood. His pupils were blown out, his chest heaving, and then his eyes dropped to my neck, where I could feel blood dripping from the wound he'd just inflicted. They traveled down again across my breasts and flat stomach to the apex of my thighs. He still gripped the back of my head loosely but firmly enough that I couldn't move away.

His cock was standing at attention, ready for some action, it seemed, because the next thing I knew, he pulled me to the edge of the table, one hand behind my neck and the other on my hips. He moved me so easily, like I weighed nothing. The fear spiked in me when he licked his lips and dove for my neck again. This time I fought, and fought hard, but he was immovable. No matter how hard I hit him, it made no difference; he felt none of it except his hunger. Then I felt the blunt head of his cock at my entrance and I froze. *No, no, no!*

I found my voice, finally: "Donovan, stop!"

All I got in response was a grunt and a long pull from his mouth on my neck. He was doing something that made my blood sing, making my pussy wet and giving me physical pleasure even as my mind fought his ministrations. By this time, he'd drunk so much of my blood I was starting to feel lightheaded. I had an almost euphoric feeling running through my body, and that was when something in me started to burn brightly. I could feel the threads of something linked to me start to throb, at first gently, but then more insistently.

I could do nothing, though. Physically, he had me under his control. Mentally, I had blocked out what was happening to my body and gone somewhere else. I saw it all happening as if from an out-of-body experience. He finally entered me; I was making all sorts of moaning sounds, but they were induced by whatever magic he had.

He wasn't gentle, pistoning into my body like he wanted to brand me, and maybe he did. I could feel my life force dwindling and I think he felt it, too, because he licked at my neck now versus taking hard drags of my blood. He couldn't resist looking at my large breasts as his next target and before I knew it, he struck again, right on my left nipple. He bit hard and injected more euphoria or whatever the fuck it was into me, because the next thing I knew, I was writhing in what looked like an intense orgasm that went on forever. He never stopped pumping his cock into me, but now he moved to the other breast and continued to fuck me so hard the wall behind the table shook. I felt a strong pull at my chest again, and this time it didn't go away.

I looked inside of me and found the golden ball of light directly beneath my sternum that had cobalt and black-opal threads attached. I went closer and felt the love and security this internal place provided. I glanced back at my physical self and found that he had changed positions and was now riding me hard from behind. Physically, I could feel the artificial pleasure he was giving me, but this wasn't real—this was a complete violation. I could see bruises forming on my body and knew the scars of what he was doing to me would last much longer than these physical manifestations of abuse. One hand gripped my hair and pulled my head back tightly while

the other wrapped around my neck, this time very tightly, cutting off my air supply. I turned away from that and went deep into myself, into the golden light ringed by cobalt and black opal and I hid there until it was all over.

He changed after that. He no longer felt the need to be kind or caring in the least. He ignored me mostly, but when he needed to feed, he became single-minded in his pursuit of me. I couldn't hide, regardless of what I tried. I went into the forest and climbed trees, huddled in shallow caves, but it never seemed to deter him. He always found me. The act of taking my blood without my consent was accompanied by his taking of my body. For weeks I fought him, and then weeks turned into months. I lost track of the season, and I didn't care. I was stuck in this nightmare with an animal that just used me for what I could give him. He wasn't as rough after the first few times, but I'm guessing it's because I stopped fighting back.

It was on a beautiful sunny day that things changed again. He woke me, not harshly, but by firmly shaking my shoulder. I sat up with a start. The only time he made physical contact was when he was going to use me. I kept very still, and then I heard him say, "We need to leave. Get your shit together. You have five minutes."

"Why?" I knew I shouldn't have said anything, but I couldn't stop myself. We were so isolated here. I had tried to find other dwellings, neighbors or hunters that could help me when I was still strong enough to wander deeper into the forest. These days, my body barely kept me alive. His feedings had become more frequent and so had the rapes.

Gripping my neck in a vise with his hand, he sneered at me. "I don't answer to you. Now do what you're told, or I'll have to help you, which I'm sure you don't want." His hot breath fanned across my face, making me flinch. He was right, I didn't want him to lay his hands on me. I nodded stiffly once, and he dropped me with a look of disgust and lust on his face.

I scampered up so quickly that a wave of dizziness slammed through me. I quickly sat back down and took several deep breaths. He was gone by that point, doing who knows what. I sat there for a few seconds, getting my bearings

and letting my body adjust. The time we'd spent together had changed me physically: I was skin and bones. Where I had curves and muscle before, I had none now. He was draining my life force, and I was powerless to stop him. I got up gingerly, changed into a simple dress and put on my stockings and shoes. Tying my hair back to the nape of my neck, I didn't bother brushing it. What was the fucking point?

I grabbed the few belongings I had, mostly clothes, and as I was putting them in a carrying pack, I felt his presence behind me. He was breathing hard, smelling my neck. I froze. I didn't dare move an inch because when he got like this, it meant that he was going to feed and fuck me. I was like a drug to him. Ever since I'd woken up in this hell, he'd gone from being a physically beautiful man to one that looked like he was possessed. He had dark circles under his eyes, and their beautiful cerulean blue had turned to an almost inky black, making him look like...what you'd expect a monster that fed on blood to look like. His cheeks were hollow, and his hair was greasy and stringy where once it was thick and golden.

I was still frozen when he struck. I wasn't ready for it. Usually I could mentally prepare for the assault, but this time he caught me unaware. I cried out in pain and surprise, but it only served to excite him. His hands latched onto my arms, holding me still even though I wasn't fighting him. I knew if I tried to get away, the pain would worsen. I attempted to go to my hidden place inside, but he was rougher than usual. It had been a week since he last fed, and I thought he might have been holding himself back to give me time to heal.

"Please, stop, Donovan. You're taking too much, too fast." My voice was reedy. I could feel him draining my life force.

He licked my neck. "I can't, I'm sorry. You're so delightfully addicting. This isn't what I wanted for us. I never meant to do this to you. I was meant to take you to your father, but your blood sang to me. I didn't see any harm in tasting you, but then I realized I couldn't give you up. Don't worry, the pleasure will make you feel better." And it did. He injected me with his sweet venom, the one that gave me pleasure as he took from me. I could feel my nipples harden and the wetness



dripping from my sex. In seconds he was inside me. I couldn't help what I felt physically, but I was disgusted by it. I wanted to hate the pleasure my body felt at having him inside me, but I was powerless.

He took his time, languidly drinking from me while he fucked me from behind. The pleasure lasted throughout; he never let me orgasm, always keeping me at the tipping point, not letting me go over. It was a different type of torture, but no less a violation. I hated him with everything I was, and so I tried to travel to my center where cobalt and black opal would greet me with love and warmth. I started to dive when I felt the ground shaking. I thought I was losing it, that I was hallucinating because this creature was sucking the life out of me, literally.

He was so intent on me that he didn't feel it or perhaps didn't care. He kept going, pumping in and out of me, then he reached around and placed his thumb on my clit, bringing me to climax quickly. My heart was racing, trying to pump the blood in my body and keep me alive as he continued to take it, and the orgasm revved up my adrenaline, putting even more pressure on my poor body to live. I started to see dark spots in my vision, and I knew this time, I wouldn't survive. It was almost a blessing, and I thanked the gods for ending this torment.

That was before the doors of the cottage were blown open and a rage-filled roar filled the space. Pulling away from me in surprise, Donovan turned toward the intruders, of whom I could only see three pairs of legs. And then everything became crystal clear, so clear it was painful. I sagged on the bed but forced myself to look into their faces—my saviors, at least for today. I was met with cobalt eyes that seared straight through to my soul and it felt like lightning struck me.

Lysander. I remembered everything.

Even though I was in shock at seeing him and remembering everything that happened, I felt shame. I closed my eyes in painful remembrance of our time together and then I felt it, the bond; he was enraged, and I thought I'd be incinerated to dust. The creature standing in front of me

laughed, he fucking laughed, and then all hell broke loose. I couldn't look Lysander in the eyes again, so I focused on the other two. Shifting my head sluggishly, I saw Alexa, and tears pooled in my eyes. They came for me. Memories flooded me, more and more. And then I heard a soft clink and a weight lifted from my left wrist. Blinking, I glanced down and noticed that the bracelet that had graced my wrist for the past several months was broken, on the floor, its stones dull and cracked.

Thinking that was strange, I reached for it, but something inside me told me not to touch it, and I pulled my hand away. The entire time I was distracted by the bracelet, Lysander, Alexa and the other were trying to get past the demon who caged me. He was strong and fast. He was also crazed and full of my blood, which must have given him an edge in fighting them because I could see the strain on Lysander's face. Donovan was still blocking my view, his back to me, when I decided to help as best I could.

Struggling, I shakily got up on my hands and knees and stood on wobbly legs. I was dangerously close to passing out, but I had to do something. I couldn't let my friend and the man I loved lose this fight. I would end this monster even if it was the last thing I did.

He blasted Alexa and Lysander with a force that knocked them both back. Elements were swirling in the air—fire, water, wind and something I hadn't seen before: shadows. I could feel Rhiannon's presence but couldn't see her and that just reinforced my need to do something, anything to help them. I had tunnel vision, and it was centered on Donovan. He was fending off their attacks with ease. He was the calm in the storm of swirling chaos, and I was with him; nothing touched me while I was in that pocket of stillness with him. I could see patches of the broken cabin, windows of visibility that showed me where my loved ones were but not much else.

Donovan glanced back at me briefly and apparently decided I wasn't a threat because he shifted his focus to Rhiannon and blew apart the shadows she had called like they were smoke. He was powerful and I began to worry that we'd perish here fighting him. My resolve hardened; I couldn't let

the people I loved die. I could see that Lysander was back up and shifting. It was almost like Donovan wanted me to see him clearly because the chaotic mass of elements altered course around Lysander. His dragon had eyes on me, and I could feel his protective instincts taking over. Half the cottage was already in pieces, and him shifting would obliterate the rest. His dragon was resistant to magic which would give us a better chance of getting out of this alive.

Somehow, Donovan reached out a hand and stopped the shift mid-change. Lysander looked shocked by the act. Panic seized me and I pushed myself harder. I was agonizingly slow in my progress. I still had several feet before I'd reach him and, instinctively, I knew I had to physically touch him to use my magic. He held Lysander mid-shift and then a roar of pain and rage hit me in my solar plexus. Whatever he was doing to Lysander was tearing him apart.

Something snapped inside—it was like a dam broke free—then the elements stopped their mad flight and stilled. I looked to Rhiannon and Alexa, and they were similarly frozen in place, their magic nullified by whatever Donovan was doing. Their faces registered intense pain, and I felt Lysander's and Rhiannon's through the bond. He was ripping them apart, literally. Shredding their magic from their core. Pulsing light emanated from his outstretched hands, and I realized he was trying to strip them of their magic. That was unheard of, and I'd reacted without thought because of what they meant to me.

I loved my family, and no one—*no one*—would harm them, not when I could do something about it. I leapt the last few feet and closed the distance between us. I didn't stop to think about what I did or how I did it, I allowed intuition to guide me: I grabbed his shoulder and he turned to look at me in surprise. My voice vibrated with power. Ancient words spilled forth, words I had no idea I knew, and the terror in his eyes told me he knew what was happening even if I didn't. His magic cut off, abruptly dropping Alexa, Rhiannon and Lysander. They slumped to the ground, but I could feel they were alive. I also felt their eyes on me, but I didn't look away from the savage who had tortured me for months. It was one thing to do that to me, quite another to do that to my family.

The words never stopped spilling forth between my lips. As they hit the air around me, golden light surrounded Donovan and me. He opened his mouth in a silent scream, but even that didn't deter my magic from exterminating this parasite. His magic was blocked first, then his physical movements froze, cracks appeared on his face and the temperature in his body rose. Throughout the metamorphosis, the words still came. He bled from every orifice—ears, nose, mouth, eyes—and it was boiling hot. I could feel his temperature rise through my contact with his body. But I couldn't pull my hand away; the magic had taken over, and it wouldn't be stopped until its job was done.

An intense wave of pure power rushed through me, blinding me by its light and strength, and it lifted me into the air with Donovan still linked to me. We swirled in a maelstrom of light and heat. His magic rose to meet me, to fight me off, but it was like a drizzle of rain to my hurricane. I ripped through his defenses and tore his magic away from him, streams of power demolishing everything in their path to find his core. I took it all, took it and absorbed it. He screamed finally, a sound that filled me with two parts joy and one part shame. I was glad he felt some of the anguish he'd inflicted on me, and reveled in the fact that I had found my power and that he would never harm me again.

My light started dimming and I floated back down with my hand still gripping his shoulder. He was barely alive; I could hear his irregular heartbeat slowing. As we landed, his body folded in on itself, no longer able to hold him, and flakes of ash lifted from it. In a matter of moments, he was no more. There was no trace of him except for a pile of ashes.

I was still filled with ancient power; golden light surrounded me. Sensing the danger was over, I felt my magic begin to recede. As it did, my broken body with all its aches and weaknesses registered in my consciousness. I looked up and found three of the most beloved faces I had ever known and cherished in my lifetime watching me. I smiled as tears streamed down my face and then it all went dark.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I woke with a start, sweat-drenched and breathing hard. I tried to sit up but was too weak. I looked around and found myself in a small, unfamiliar room. There was a fireplace, a rocking chair and two small tables on either side of the bed, one of which had medical supplies and the other fragrant incense. I looked down at myself and was appalled at what I saw. I was emaciated, like I'd been starved for months, maybe even years. There was a bag of fluid attached to a tube that ran down and inserted into my arm. Gingerly touching my arm where it connected with the tube, I felt a small sting of pain, but it was minor. Releasing the tube, I lay back down and took deep breaths. I tried to recall the last thing I did and was having a hard time because I felt so weak physically, emotionally and psychologically. I was beaten down and couldn't concentrate on anything at the moment.

At the sound of the door opening, I whipped my head around too fast and a wave of dizziness hit me hard. I closed my eyes and breathed through my nose. I could hear whoever it was coming closer, so I slowly opened my eyes and found a pair of strong, muscular legs that led to a very tall, broad and beautiful dragon. My mate, Lysander. Suddenly, everything came back like a punch to my gut. I closed my eyes to avoid the look of pity on his face. Turning away, I gave him my back. I couldn't look at him without feeling shame and regret. I should have known what that animal was doing. How could I have forgotten my mates?

"Donyale, look at me." Even as his voice assuaged my soul, my heart broke further. How could he want me now, after

everything that had been done to me? “Donyale.” He gently took my left shoulder in his enormous hand and turned me to face him.

I kept my gaze on the foot of the bed. How could I face him?

“Look at me, please.” He kept his voice soft and low so as to not startle me. He didn’t realize that I was hiding my shame from him. I wanted to bask in his presence and let it heal my battered and broken spirit, but how could I after what had happened?

“Please.”

At hearing his voice break, I looked up at his gorgeous cobalt eyes. His dragon was so close to the surface that his pupils had changed to vertical slits. I took my time examining every angle of his face, memorizing it so I’d never again forget what this male was to me.

“I’m sorry.” The harsh whisper escaped me. My throat was raw, but I had to let him know that I’d never meant to forget.

“No, you are not at fault. He took you from us. We’re back at Madame Pauline’s. Athene examined you and told us that he used an ancient form of magic that had been mostly lost to time. He erased your memories and suppressed the bonds so thoroughly that even your spirit couldn’t recognize them. She spent hours clearing the magic from your body and essence. This isn’t your fault. It’s mine. I should have flown us to Skolos, but I let protocol get in the way.” His voice trembled with suppressed emotion.

Reaching out, I cupped his face, feeling the stubble of a half-grown beard roughly against my palm. He blamed himself, how typical of my dragon. Wetness slipped through my fingers, and I realized that it was his tears. My heart broke for him and everything he’d had to endure, and it overrode my pain. How could he think this was his fault?

“No, mate. I won’t let you blame yourself. How could you have known this would happen, that my father would send that monster to take me? If I had known my power and learned

how to use it, I might have been able to defend us, but I didn't. How can you think you are to blame? We all did what we thought was right. We all agreed to take the path that we did. I won't have you taking on that responsibility. You are *not* to blame. Do you hear me, Lysander?"

Pain-filled cobalt eyes looked back at me. There was more to this than guilt over what had happened with Donovan. Some of the issues affecting him had to do with our shared history and his treatment of me. I could feel it through the bond, but now wasn't the time to delve into that. I could feel my energy waning. So, I changed the subject; otherwise, we'd end up wallowing in despair over the events that had led to this. I wasn't ready to talk about it and he sensed that because he nodded and took a deep, healing breath. His dragon receded and when he looked at me again, his dark midnight-blue eyes were all Lysander.

Sighing, I asked, "Please tell me that no one else was hurt. I couldn't bear it if they were."

"We had a few bruises but nothing serious. Leanne already healed those minor injuries," he told me matter-of-factly. "Little one, we need to heal you properly. Leanne could only do so much, and Athene told us you'll need magical healing to restore what you've lost both physically and magically." He picked my hand up gingerly and laced his fingers through mine.

I gripped his hand as tightly as I could, showing him how much I'd missed him. "What does that mean?"

"Rhiannon and I need to heal you. It is rarely done, but she insisted that if we don't do this now, you'll weaken further. What he did to you..." Pausing, he cleared his throat before continuing. "What he did to you was like an infection, attacking your magical core. Athene tried to repair the damage, but when she healed you, she had to remove some of your magic that was wholly infected. To repair your core, your mates need to give you some of their essence to replace what was lost."

"What will that do to you?" I knew there had to be a catch.

“It’ll temporarily weaken our magic, but it should restore itself after a period of time.” He held his hand up in anticipation of my protest. “If we don’t do this, the fissures will widen, weakening your magic further over time and eventually making it unpredictable. The unpredictability could also negatively affect your mental state. Rhiannon and I discussed it thoroughly with Athene and the others and decided that we must do this. The cost outweighs the benefits, especially your health.”

I pressed my lips together because I suddenly had the urge to cry uncontrollably. Tears bloomed in my eyes, blurring my vision of this beautiful soul that the gods graced me with. I felt undeserving, and he knew it by the way he leaned down and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Little one, no one will separate us again. I cannot bear it and won’t accept anything less than death to be away from you.”

That was all it took. My shoulders heaved and I cried like the broken thing I was. He lifted me off the bed and cradled me in his arms. He held me until my tears were spent and my body stopped trembling. I was exhausted after such an emotional purge. He said nothing but offered me solace and safety. I could hear his heart beating, lulling me to sleep. My puffy eyes drifted closed, and I knew nothing else but deep, dreamless sleep.

The next time I woke, Rhiannon was sitting in the chair next to my bed. She had dark circles under her eyes and brackets framing her pouty lips, as if she hadn’t slept for weeks because of her worry. She wasn’t looking at me but staring off into space. But I saw all this just by looking at her exquisite profile. My hand reached out of its own accord. It was like my body needed to touch her to make sure she was real and reconfirm that she was still my mate. Feeling my skin on hers felt like coming home. Lysander was the first, and now my other mate’s presence eased the tightness in my chest. At the touch of my hand, she turned swiftly to me, eyes wide and full of unshed tears.

“Donyale...” She didn’t have to say anything else. I could feel it through the bond.



“I’m here and alive, thanks to Lysander, Alexa and you.” My voice was still rough, so she leaned over and grabbed the glass of water sitting on the table next to the bed. Lifting my head with her other hand, she held the glass to my lips to sip. The water was lukewarm, probably because it had been sitting there for a while, but it tasted like heaven to me.

“You’ve been asleep for two days since you and Lysander spoke. Athene and Leanne told us it would be like this until you fully recover. It scares me, Donyale. Not just how long it’s taking you to heal, but everything. I won’t ever leave your side.” Her voice shook but her hand stayed steady as I drank a few more sips. The entire time I was looking into her wondrous eyes, losing myself in their depths. She was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen, and I thanked the gods she was my mate. She and Lysander were everything to me, along with my best friends, whom I hadn’t seen yet.

“I really don’t want to talk about what happened with that monster right now, if you’re about to ask. I’m not ready. But I do want to get cleaned up and into some fresh clothes and then see everyone. Will you help me do that?” She smiled as I said it. I suppose it was a good sign that I didn’t want to wallow in bed. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to do that; it just wasn’t me. I knew it wouldn’t help me to lay in bed reliving what happened. While my trauma from my early years was different, I had learned very quickly that feeling sorry for myself got me nowhere fast.

“Alright, love. I’ll help you. First, we need to get you up and out of that bed.”

The door suddenly opened and in walked Lysander. Freshly showered, hair still dripping, and in clean clothes. He looked like a walking wet dream. My body’s reaction to my two mates hadn’t changed, but I couldn’t think about sex right now. It was too soon. Still, butterflies were swarming in my belly as he and Rhiannon helped me out of bed and into the adjacent bathing room. I was too embarrassed to remove my clothes in front of Lysander. Understanding dawned and he excused himself to put new linens on the bed. Rhiannon put a hand on his shoulder in comfort and thanked him as he left. I

sat by the tub, watching it fill up. I still had the tube inserted into my hand, which made it awkward to remove my clothes, but we managed.

Rhiannon took a sharp breath when she saw my body. My bones were jutting out with little to no meat on them. I looked like a walking skeleton, which was why I didn't want Lysander to see me. I would have preferred that Rhiannon not see me like this either, but someone had to help me, and I was more comfortable with her because she was a woman. I felt ashamed at the thought—that one of my mates would better understand my embarrassment than another—but there it was. She helped me into the tub and washed me clean.

It was then that I heard my friends in the other room. “I don't want them to see me like this. I'm okay with Leanne because I'm sure she needs to examine me, but Alexa, Solara and Mara need to wait in the other room with Lysander. Please.”

“I'll be right back.” She left me soaking in the warm water. I felt better after the bath, almost myself, but not quite. I knew I'd never be the same after Donovan.

Leanne accompanied her when she reentered the room. My friend's eyes were all business as she checked my vitals. I was able to remain in the tub as she did this, and once she was satisfied that my body was healing, she helped Rhiannon get me out of the tub, dried off and dressed. They sat me in front of the vanity as Rhiannon brushed my hair and braided it into one thick, heavy plait that fell down to the middle of my back.

Leanne watched her wrestle my strands into some semblance of order, quietly keeping us company. “Tell me how you're feeling physically, Don. Any pain anywhere?” Her soft voice penetrated my private thoughts.

“No pain, just weak. I feel like I could sleep for years. My body tires so easily.” Thankfully, my voice was steady.

“That's normal. It'll take time for your body to recover. We will need to conduct the bond healing ritual of your magic soon as that will help you heal much faster. With Rhiannon and Lysander as your mates, they can share their shifter

healing magic—a ‘transference’—which will speed up your progress significantly. You’ll be back on your feet and feeling much stronger in a few days once the healing is done. Did Lysander explain it to you?” She was speaking in her physician’s voice, so I responded in kind.

“Yes, he did. When can we do it?” I wanted to feel normal again, at least be able to walk on my own without help.

“We can do it as soon as tonight. We have everything we need and are ready to go. Athene will need to perform it, though. It requires a lot of magic and someone who has experience doing this. She’ll be here shortly to check on you and we can discuss preparations at that time. Right now, I want you to rest. The transference will tire you even more, and your magic will be taxed heavily when we perform it. I would rather wait until you are stronger physically, but Athene insists that it should be done as soon as possible. The infection left behind some residue that is expanding the fissures in your magic, weakening it further. The sooner we address this, the sooner your magic can be made whole again.” She paused in her clinical speech and looked at me. She had been holding back her emotion to give me space, but I saw it clearly now. It was written all over her face, especially her expressive eyes.

She leaned down and hugged me tightly. I reached around and returned her embrace, squeezing as tightly as I could. “I love you, Don. You gave us quite a scare, and I’m so thankful to the gods that you came back to us.” She whispered it softly so only I could hear, but Rhiannon was a shifter, with shifter hearing, and I glanced at her in the mirror. She had tears running down her cheeks and a generous smile on her face.

Where I had for so long been surrounded by hate I was now surrounded by love. I was humbled. “I love you, too, Leanne. And don’t worry. I don’t plan on being separated from any of you ever again, if I can help it.” I tried to keep it lighthearted because I didn’t want to become a blubbling mess again. I, like Rhiannon, had tears flowing freely, and when I looked at Leanne, so did she.

Leanne leaned back and smiled, “Come on, they’re waiting for us in the other room. They’re beside themselves with

worry. I had to practically tie Mara to her bed to keep her from barging into your room when you woke the first time.” I hiccupped a laugh and took their hands as I stood. My legs were shaky and weak, but I was too stubborn to do more than just hold their hands as I walked through the door into the bedroom. I was looking down, focusing on making sure I didn’t trip and fall on my face when I heard quick footsteps and just barely caught a glimpse of Solara and Mara rushing me. They stopped abruptly before they could crash into me and stood uncertainly in front of me, tears running down their beautiful faces. I let go of Leanne and Rhiannon and took one step toward my two friends, and we fell into an embrace.

“You scared us half to death. Don’t ever do that again!” Mara’s harsh whisper penetrated my thoughts. I knew she didn’t blame me; this was her way of saying she cared.

“I won’t, I promise. We’ll be better prepared next time.”

We were still hugging one another when a third pair of arms circled around us. Alexa stood behind me, her arms completing the cocoon of love that my friends always provided. “I love you, Don. I’m so glad you’re back. We’ll finish this and make sure no one hurts you ever again,” Alexa told me.

I was choked up and couldn’t get my words out, but I nodded and reached through the nest of arms for her hand and squeezed tightly. Then, taking a deep breath, I looked up to find Rhiannon and Lysander waiting patiently for me. I pulled away slightly and my friends let go, but Alexa stayed with me, holding me by my waist so I had some support as I made my way to my mates.

Reaching out, I touched Lysander first and he immediately grasped my hand and took Alexa’s place. He held me like I might break at any second. I suppose I’d think that too, if I were him and saw myself through his eyes. But I was stronger than that. I didn’t push away or try to stand on my own. Having him hold me felt...right and good. So, I let it be.

Rhiannon stood in front of me. I took a step toward her and she didn’t move right away, then leaned over and softly kissed

my forehead, my eyes, then my lips. It was a sweet kiss, full of hope and love. Something shifted inside, the bond. I felt more spiritually balanced after she did that. Lysander's hand tightened on my waist, and I glanced up at him. He gazed into my eyes with such fierce emotion that I froze. He'd never looked at me that way before. Our interactions had been mercurial at best and had only started getting better right before I was taken.

He cupped my face with his other hand and leaned down. The kiss he gave me wasn't innocent—no, it was a branding of the soul, a shock to my system, an awakening of the spirit. I could feel warmth radiating through me as the kiss went on and on. I melted into him, reveling in the scent, feel and taste that was Lysander. He pulled back and we were both breathing more heavily, and when I opened my eyes, all I saw was cobalt. His dragon was close to the surface, but it was still Lysander I was looking at. In that moment, I felt it: our bond snapped into place. His dragon retreated, as if he was just ensuring our bond was sealed before leaving us.

“The bond...” I looked at him in wonder but also concern. He had repeatedly told me he didn't want this. Leading up to the point I was taken, we had found a path forward, but the bond was still only half formed.

“There's nothing that could stop me from standing next to you and loving you for the rest of my days. I'm a selfish creature and won't deny myself any longer. I always wanted you, don't ever doubt that. I'll tell you later why I did what I did. I'm not proud of it, nor do I expect your forgiveness. But if you will have me, I'm yours for eternity.”

His voice dove deep into me, singing to my soul in a way I hadn't experienced before. Rhiannon and I had bonded almost immediately but it had felt different, like we'd always been together yet geographically apart—it felt like a homecoming. This...this felt like I'd found a piece of myself after an eternity of searching, the piece that made my soul sing.

I took one shaky breath. “Careful what you ask for, Lysander. Eternity is long time.” Smiling, I took his face in

both my hands, feeling the smooth, freshly shaved skin with my fingertips. “You cannot and will not be rid of me now.”

He crushed me to him like I was a lifeline and kissed me with the same intense passion. I felt complete; more than that, I felt like I could take on the world with my mates and friends. How could I not?

He ended our kiss and Leanne jumped in. “Sometime today she needs to eat, Lysander. I mean this is all entertaining to watch you devour each other, but I think she needs another kind of sustenance at the moment.” She said it in her clinical voice, but I looked around and everyone had smiles plastered to their faces, stretching from ear to ear. Mara and Alexa giggled at Leanne’s comment. Glancing at Lysander to see his reaction, he had a smirk on his face and was completely unashamed of his behavior. I could feel it in the bond, too. Rhiannon came up beside me and helped guide me to the small dining table in the room.

Everyone fanned out, but Rhiannon and Lysander stood behind me like they were guarding me. Feeling a little put off by their behavior, I sent a little emotion through the bond. What I got back were twin messages: humor and “suck it up.”

Shaking my head, I looked at the food in front of me. It was light fare: chicken soup, bread and cheese. It wasn’t until I looked at it that I felt my ravenous hunger rise. Conversation rose around me as I dug in. I ate until I could fit no more in my belly, which wasn’t much. I ate half the soup and a few bites of bread and cheese.

“Don’t worry, this is normal. After the transfer of power, your appetite will increase. The trauma your body sustained will take time to recover.” And just like that, Leanne inadvertently triggered my memories of Donovan and what he’d done to me. I reacted instinctively and flinched physically. Leanne immediately apologized for saying what she did. Rhiannon and Lysander jumped in and tried to change the topic of conversation.

“No. I’m sorry, Leanne. It’s still fresh...”

“Don’t apologize to me, Don!” Rage radiated from Leanne. She and I had had our differences before, but her anger was always about a decision I made or a debate we had. This was different. I could hear the pain and fury in her voice, and it was physically palpable. “This is not your fault, and I won’t have you telling me you’re sorry. You have nothing to be sorry about. Do you hear me?”

Taken aback by her vehement reaction, I nodded obediently. Looking around, everyone was staring at Leanne like she had grown horns. She’d never reacted this way before. No one commented on it though—the look on her face deterred anyone from asking what the hell was going on.

We were saved by the door opening and my aunt striding in like she owned the place, because she did. “Ah, awake I see.” She made a beeline for me, and I braced myself for whatever was coming. Athene was the most beautiful being I had ever met, and the most powerful. Her aura was almost blinding if you used your magical sight, and she towered over most people. She wasn’t nearly Lysander’s height, but for a woman she was extraordinarily tall and physically fit, a warrior. She carried herself with grace and confidence.

She reached my side, making Lysander adjust his position, bent down and hugged me. I was so stunned that I didn’t return the embrace. She kissed my temple and then walked around the table to face me. She was all business after that. “We’ll perform the transference tonight. We cannot wait any longer; the aftereffects of whatever was done to your magic are still present and slowly spreading throughout your body. Are you ready?”

“What does this transfer entail?” Rhiannon spoke up.

“We’ll need everyone to be present. The primary donors of the magic will be you and Lysander, but I would encourage Mara, Solara and Alexa to contribute as well. The more magic we have, the better. Leanne will need to be on standby for any medical attention that’s required after the transfer is complete. Each of you will need to be physically touching Donyale and I will open the pathways between your magic cores. For Lysander and Rhiannon, it will be easy and painless. For the

rest, there will be discomfort because you are not bonded to Donyale the way they are. The entire transfer will take about an hour, and the recovery period for everyone but Donyale will be several days. She on the other hand will recover her strength and have her magic fully healed in about a week.” She paused, waiting for everyone’s reaction or more questions.

“We’ll help however we can,” Alexa stated.

“Everyone experiences the discomfort differently. For some it’s purely physical, some emotional, and yet others feel both and more. This won’t be easy for anyone. During the process, Donyale will experience your pain. The receiver is always the one that takes on more. Are you up for that, my dear?” She made eye contact with me.

Calling me “my dear” threw me off for a bit, but I responded, “So, what you’re saying is that I’ll feel *everyone’s* pain during the transfer?”

“Yes. Mostly Alexa, Solara and Mara’s pain. Lysander and Rhiannon you will feel less so because you already have open pathways to each other. But I have to force your friends’ open, creating a channel that does not exist.”

“Will the channels stay open after the transfer?”

She gave me her full attention. “No, that’s why it will take a few days for them to heal. Artificial pathways are like wounds in that they’ll heal on their own. I must cut them open so the magic flows through. Then they’ll heal over, and their magic will restore itself afterward.”

“Will they suffer any aftereffects from this? Will they have issues with their magic after the transfer?”

She took a seat across from me, patiently answering all my questions. “Their magic will be weakened for a period of time, but no, they won’t suffer any long-term effects from this. They are voluntarily offering their magic, so there’s no damage in the process. Had they been forced to transfer it, they could suffer from trauma, or their magic could be warped. But in this case, it won’t harm them in any way.”



Taking my eyes off her, I looked to my friends. Each one confidently met my eyes, letting me know there would be no changing their minds. Still, I had to ask. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“There’s no doubt in my mind, Don.” Solara spoke first, followed by Alexa and Mara. Each assented to the procedure.

Taking a moment to think about what was going to happen, I turned back to my aunt. “Will it change my magic?”

“It may. I haven’t done this in a very long time, but of the times that the procedure has been performed, some individuals experienced a difference in their magic afterward. Some described it like a blend of their magic and whomever contributed their own to them. It could intensify depending on the strength of everyone’s magic. But because your magic is already stronger than theirs, I suspect the changes, if there are any, will only help to stabilize it, giving you more versatility in what you can do. We won’t know until after the transfer.”

Her honesty was appreciated. At least she wasn’t sugarcoating it.

“Alright. If everyone agrees, then I do too. We’ll do this tonight.” I looked at her as I said this. She smiled widely, transforming her face from just beautiful to drop-dead gorgeous. Ugh, relatives...

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lysander and Rhiannon stayed with me, getting me back into bed after Leanne checked my progress and removed the tube in my arm. Once I was in, they climbed in after me, lying on either side of me. I must have been tired because I didn't remember anything past being plastered to Lysander's front and Rhiannon holding me from behind before I was in a dreamless sleep.

Gentle kisses across my face woke me and I felt the bed shift behind me. Opening my eyes, I was met with brilliant glowing cobalt. His dragon was present. I hadn't moved at all during my nap. Rhiannon leaned over behind me and pressed a soft kiss to my temple.

"It's time to go, Donyale." She said it softly into the stillness of the room. Lysander's left hand was on my bony hip, gently drawing circles on it. Embarrassed at my physical state, I pulled back but then felt his hand grip my hip firmly.

"No, you don't turn away from me. You are mine and I am yours. Do you understand what that means, little one?" His dragon almost growled out the words.

Taking a chance, I trailed my eyes from his broad chest to his neck, up to his kissable lips and then to his eyes, which were now all dragon. The dark slit of his pupil was present. I kept silent, but I knew he felt everything I felt and saw everything I saw. The bond throbbed with his emotions as well as mine. Rhiannon positioned herself behind me again, only this time her arm came back around and held me tightly

around the waist. I could feel her body flush against my own, and my body began to respond to them.

“I’m not who I was before. I can feel the change in me.” I whispered it, but they heard me clearly.

“Our experiences change us and how we see the world, but they don’t change who we are at our core. And you, you belong to us and we to you. Our bond is sealed, and nothing will come between us because of it.” He reached up and cupped my face. “Your body will heal, your physical scars will heal, and we will help your soul heal from what happened.” The last was almost unintelligible because his anger bled through. I was ashamed, I couldn’t help it.

Rhiannon’s arm tightened further on my waist. “We’ll get through this together and be stronger for it.” Her warm breath fanned the back of my neck, then her lips followed. “Come, we need to get you ready for the transfer. We’ve been called twice now; I’m sure Athene will come drag us out of here if we don’t move quickly.” She chuckled a bit and squeezed me tighter, not moving from her position.

Nodding, I lay my head against Lysander’s chest and gripped Rhiannon’s arm around my waist, taking in their love for me and drawing in their scents. We lay there for several minutes, unmoving, when I nodded and tapped them, letting them know I was ready to get back to the normal me, not this weak thing that needed help getting dressed. We rose, and they did just that, helping me get dressed in a simple gown that Athene must have provided. It wasn’t my style, but I went with it because I wasn’t going to waste any energy on fashion.

Lysander spoke behind me. “Would you like me to carry you?”

I looked up at him in the full-length mirror I stood in front of, taking in all the changes to my body. My eyes immediately found his. His dragon was present, slotted cobalt eyes looking at me with only affection.

Smiling to myself—had he changed as much as I had while we were separated?—I responded, “How far is it to the room the transference will be performed in?” I wasn’t a fool. I

could walk for a few minutes, but it would take its toll. I hated being carried like a child, but I also wanted to be fully awake and aware of what was happening.

“It’s several doors down, not far. I just wanted an excuse to hold you.” He grinned and it transformed his face into one of pure beauty. He leaned down and wrapped one arm around my waist and pressed his face into my neck, taking a deep breath. I melted into him; this felt so right. Rhiannon walked back from the bathroom looking like a living goddess and, clasping my hand, stood in front of me. She was taller than me and dressed in black form-fitting trousers with dark tan boots and a loose-fitting, cream-colored shirt that was open at the throat. Just as Lysander was taking in my scent, I took the opportunity to tug Rhiannon closer and placed my face into the crook of her neck, taking deep healing breaths.

Lifting my head after a few heartbeats, I raised up, kissed her luscious lips and pulled back into Lysander’s embrace. “I will walk. I’ll let you know if I need you to carry me if I get too tired on the way.”

Taking one last deep inhale, he turned me and kissed me hungrily. The kiss was more about the emotional rollercoaster we’d been on than sexual, but it flowed through my body like lightning. Rhiannon placed kisses on my neck, only heightening the sensations running through my limbs and pooling in my center. You’d think that after everything I’d been through my body would shy away from any sexual contact. Yet it recognized these two as part of my soul, not foreign but an extension of me, and accepted them. Our bonds eased the physical recollection of the trauma my body had sustained. I was glad for them; they made me feel alive again, and not some dead thing in an animated body.

Rhiannon’s hands were wandering now, touching me everywhere, and found their way to my breasts, cupping them like they were breakable glass and rubbing my nipples through the dress. I moaned into Lysander’s mouth, and he took the opportunity to delve into its depths with his tongue. I tasted him and memorized the sensation so I would never forget it again.

I was breathing hard when he turned me, his front to my back and me facing Rhiannon again. His hands replaced hers, and I tipped my head back against his chest, giving her full access to my mouth. She greedily took and I was transported to a place where my bonds filled me with pure, unadulterated emotion for my mates. I wanted them desperately as I tasted Rhiannon's sweetness and felt Lysander's hands lift my dress and palm my sex. I was dripping. His other hand kneaded my breasts, one of the few body parts that hadn't shrunk with the rest of me. The sensations made me moan, and I unbuttoned Rhiannon's blouse further. Her full breasts were in my hands, nipples hard as pebbles. Her breath sped up with mine, and then Lysander slipped his fingers through my folds and super-heated my wet core.

Rhiannon moved to licking and kissing my neck, and opened the top of my bodice, grabbing my left breast. The feel of her wet mouth on my nipple took me to another level. Lysander gripped my hair, gently forcing my head back and devouring my mouth while Rhiannon feasted on my breasts as he continued to finger me. I was at their mercy, letting them fill me with heat. Lysander was so hard, his cock was like granite against my back. Cool air brushed against me and made me start, but Lysander held me in place. His fingers were replaced by Rhiannon's tongue, and the heat exploded within me.

He allowed me to look down and I saw his hand on Rhiannon's head, urging her on, guiding her movements. It was so hot that I almost came. I stared at myself in the mirror and saw a wonton mess: my bodice was wide open, breasts spilling out, my hair free and flowing down one side of my body. Lysander's eyes watched me as Rhiannon delved into my core, drinking my essence like it was ambrosia. Her red hair was loose as well and reflected the light coming in from the windows. Bobbing back and forth, my leg hiked up over one shoulder, she greedily sucked, tasted and nipped my clit. My release was right at the surface, my body coiling for it. Lysander took that opportunity to slip several fingers into my pussy from behind; Rhiannon adjusted and focused more intently on my clit. They let me ride that wave for minutes,

hours—hell, I couldn't keep track. Lysander pulled out and licked his fingers while watching me in the mirror, and it was the sexiest thing I'd ever experienced.

I was flush with desire, and then Rhiannon went back to my slit and pushed through with her tongue, expanding it, and the vibrations began. Lysander reached around the front and pinched my clit with one hand and massaged my left breast with the other while Rhiannon's tongue expanded further. She made it almost as big as his cock would be, and the vibration she exerted sent me over the edge.

My release slammed into me so hard I saw stars. I didn't close my eyes though; I kept them open, watching Lysander's darken further, his dragon so close to the surface that his body shimmered a deep blue. He was so hard that it must have hurt. I extended my hand back to touch him, and what I found felt like stone. I rubbed it through his trousers, and a deep rumble resonated from his chest, the sound moving right through my body, making me even wetter, if that were possible. Rhiannon was lapping up my cream, licking and sucking, and then stood, blocking my view of my dragon. We were both flush with intense desire and sexual need.

She kissed me and I tasted myself, loving that our essence was blended. I wanted to stamp myself all over her and Lysander. I wanted to make sure that everyone knew they were mine. I growled and ripped her shirt open, sucking on her tight hard nipples while Lysander rubbed himself behind me. Knowing my dragon needed release, I sucked hard on Rhiannon's right nipple, making her gasp with desire, then turned to take Lysander in. Rhiannon continued to caress me from behind as I dropped to my knees, quickly freeing his cock from its confinement. It reminded me of our first encounter and how he absolutely took over after I sucked him off. I didn't hesitate; I opened my mouth and took him all in. The blunt tip of his cock hit the back of my throat and he placed his big hand on my head, showing me the rhythm he wanted.

I bobbed up and down. Rhiannon positioned herself behind me, reaching around and rubbing my pussy while I licked,

sucked and devoured Lysander's cock. It was so big that I could only get about half of it inside my mouth before it hit the back of my throat. So, I used my hands to squeeze the base and pump in sync with my mouth. I licked the precum that collected at the tip, and it tasted like the sweetest fruit. Rhiannon pushed my knees apart, and I accommodated her as she slipped underneath me and began anew. I groaned at the feel of her tongue on me, making Lysander growl in response. Rhiannon totally distracted me, but I renewed my efforts. Lysander gripped my hair at the base and guided me back to his cock, fucking my mouth with vigor. I was hurtling into my next release with Rhiannon playing me like an instrument. Her fingers, tongue, even teeth were wreaking havoc on my core, making me squirm.

I gyrated feverishly on her mouth, chasing my orgasm while I took as much of Lysander as possible into my mouth, bobbing my head, sucking my cheeks in and pulling on his cock like my life depended on it. He moved faster and I let him take control, my hair gripped in a vise and his hips pumping fast and hard. I reached down and pinched my nipples and Rhiannon hit the perfect spot, forcing a release out of me. I moaned and almost blacked out, but then warmth filled my mouth. Lysander's cock shot it down my throat, coating my tongue deliciously. I swallowed reflexively and then greedily, taking it all and asking for more. He groaned loudly as Rhiannon continued to sip from my core, cleaning me up.

I moved my pussy back and forth on her mouth, enjoying the aftershocks of my orgasm as much as the orgasm itself. Lysander knelt, his cock slipping from my mouth. He kissed me fervently, uncaring that he tasted himself on me. He lifted me and turned me to face Rhiannon. She was on her knees and looked so damn beautiful that I wanted to hold that image in my head forever. Her blouse was wide open with her full perfect breasts on display; her hair looked like fire, surrounding her like a halo. Her lips were swollen and wanting for attention. I pulled her to me. I touched her breasts first, feeling their firmness in my hands and leaned down, taking her left nipple into my mouth. Deciding we needed a more

comfortable spot, I got up and they followed me. I walked over to the bed, Rhiannon's hand clasped in mine, and guided her to lie down. I started to undress her, pulling off her trousers and she helped me.

Lysander took the clothes and placed them on the chair next to the bed. I kept my clothes on, bodice gaping open and all. I spread Rhiannon's legs wide and admired her pink center that left nothing to hide. My mouth watered at the thought of her cream. I sat there, staring at her for a moment, and then leaned down and licked from back to front with the flat of my tongue, reveling in the taste of her. She moaned loudly and I dove in. Lysander watched us; I found the experience so hot that I reached out a hand to him blindly. He took it, and I pulled him behind me and he lifted my dress. It felt so right. He knelt behind me on the bed. I turned my attention to Rhiannon and began to hum, making her cry out and grind into me, pushing my face into her pussy. I loved the taste of her. Like Lysander, she tasted sweet to me, like honey, and I drank for all I was worth, selfishly taking, taking, taking.

Lysander's tongue licked me from back to front and it startled me. I paused, waiting for his next move, and then I felt it: the blunt head of his huge cock was at my entrance. Yes, yes, that was what I wanted. My ass in the air, he moved his cock up and down against my sex, touching my clit and then moving back to my opening, making me groan as I continued to lick, suck and eat out Rhiannon. She was writhing under me, wanting more, so I gave it to her.

Focusing my intent, I started to hum anew, and as I did, Lysander entered me from behind. He stretched me to the limit and paused, waiting for me to adjust. But I wanted it all; I needed him to move, so I moved forward an inch and slammed back onto his cock, making him hiss in pleasure. He gripped my hips firmly, lifting them up a bit to get a better angle and pumped into me, fucking me hard, just the way I liked it.

Rhiannon's hips were grinding back and forth, getting more and more friction as I continued to hum, devouring her like it was my last meal. I reached up and grabbed one of her breasts and rolled her nipple between my fingers, making her



shout in pleasure. Wetness filled my mouth with her orgasm. I lapped it up, drinking down its sweetness, filling me like Lysander's cum. I was panting, so turned on that I was about to pass out if I didn't reach my orgasm. She then gripped my hand, taking my fingers into her mouth at the same time as Lysander put his finger in my ass, and I came undone, moaning loud and long. The orgasm lasted forever, my vision dimming as Lysander pumped into me harder, rubbing my clit with one hand and pushing two fingers into my ass, prolonging my pleasure. With a deep growl that vibrated through my body, I felt him come inside me, his cock swelling slightly at the release of the hot spurt of seed that settled in my core.

We lay there, spent. Lysander didn't put any weight on me, instead staying seated deep within me, not wanting to end our connection. The smell of sex lingered in the air, mixed with loud panting. My head rested on Rhiannon's stomach as her fingers filtered through my hair, which I was now sure would need to be redone. Lysander leaned down, kissed the back of my neck and pulled out. I felt empty without him inside me. Rhiannon gently lifted my head to look at her. Dark opals stared at me as she guided me to lay next to her. I followed her up and she placed kisses along my forehead, eyes, cheeks and finally my lips. Soft kisses that were meant to show love and affection. Lysander went into the bathroom and came back out with a wet cloth. He was gloriously naked, and I couldn't help myself, my eyes feasted on his beauty, feeling a stirring again for more.

He smiled. "We need to get moving or Athene will hunt us down, and something tells me we don't want that." He wiped the evidence of our activities off my sex. He was gentle, but the friction of the cloth on my pussy made me moan in need. He paused and took a deep breath, fighting for control.

"Little one, we can continue once your magic is healed. I'd also prefer to have you all to myself. My dragon allowed sharing this time, but he's a possessive bastard and won't tolerate anyone else touching you while you are with us." He chuckled as he said this, taking the sting out of his words.

I glanced at Rhiannon, and she had a small smile on her face, not offended at all.

“Dragons tend to be overly territorial,” she said. “The fact that this one hasn’t broken free and tried to stake his claim yet shows great restraint.” She kissed me as she said these things. That and the combination of the cloth Lysander was using to clean my swollen sex made me want to push for another round, but I also felt how tired my body was.

I closed my eyes and went deep inside me to the center of my being where my magic was housed. I saw our mate connections, and they were stronger than ever...bright and almost glowing.

I then looked at my essence—my life force and soul where my magic stemmed from—and I gasped. It was streaked with dark fissures throughout. Where I used to emanate almost a blinding gold aura of magic, it now had dark-brown shadows that made my magic look like it was cracking under its influence. I tried to reach closer for it, but the pain of the action made me pull back immediately. There was an aggression to it that I couldn’t describe.

Whatever this was, it felt alive, like it knew I was there—but its time was up.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lysander was now fully dressed with his back to me, looking out the window, and I could hear Rhiannon in the bathroom cleaning herself up. I shifted to a sitting position and Lysander turned to me immediately. I held up my hand as he started walking toward me. I needed to get up by myself. The sooner I got back to health, the better. He stopped in his tracks and nodded once. I could feel my bodice was still open and his eyes were burning trails between one breast and the other. Smirking, I reached for the ties and began to put myself in order.

“We need to do this now. Whatever this is, it’s consuming my magic. I saw it and felt it.” Hearing a menacing growl, I glanced up quickly and noticed Lysander grinding his teeth in anger. Jaw muscles stood out and his eyes glowed. “It’ll be okay, right? Athene knows what she’s doing. The transference will clear it.” I comforted him even though I had no idea if the transfer of power would actually take care of it.

“We’ll make it right.” That was all he said as he walked over to me and helped me straighten my clothing. Rhiannon stepped out of the bathroom then, looking as fresh as the morning dawn. How did she fucking do it? Shaking my head, I kept my eyes on her as she climbed onto the bed behind me and started adjusting my braid. I must have looked like a complete mess, but she managed to ensure not a hair was out of place. Giving her my profile, I thanked her, and she responded by giving me another kiss on the temple.

“No need for thanks, beloved. We are one now and it’s my job to take care of you just as you would take care of me.” Her husky voice wrapped around me.

Sighing, I turned back to Lysander, who was kneeling before me, helping me put on my slippers. His big hands covered my calves and placed the slippers on my feet expertly. Our bond was teeming with affection and adoration, and I accepted it. No more fighting between us. That excited me and filled me with joy, which I sent back to him. His head snapped up and a softness entered his eyes that I hadn’t seen before. His brilliant smile blinded me momentarily. I blinked a few times to make sure I was seeing properly. He chuckled at my stunned expression and extended a hand to help me up.

Rhiannon came around and stood next to Lysander. In another world, they would have made a beautiful match, but they were mine—both of them—and that filled me with fascination and appreciation for what the gods had granted me. I didn’t need other mates; they would always be enough. Suddenly, Donovan’s face flashed before my eyes. I trembled and tightened my grip on Lysander’s hand. I could hear his breath hitch in alarm.

“We’re here now. We won’t let anything happen to you.” His voice penetrated the reel of memories flipping through my mind. I heard a disembodied chuckle, and I just knew that it wasn’t over. Donovan had done something to me that would continue to affect me. My body hunched in agony, the pain coming directly from my core.

Rhiannon shouted my name, concern etched into her features as I stared at her. Lysander picked me up in his arms and raced out of the room. It was all a blur, and I didn’t hear much other than my own terrified breathing. Something was very wrong, and I felt myself slipping into unconsciousness. I tried to fight it, but it pulled me under, and what I found deep within me was Donovan. I panicked and tried to wake myself up, but all it did was make him laugh.

“What’s the matter, love? Didn’t expect to see me again? Did you miss me?” His voice dripped venom that froze me in place. What was this? How could he be here?

“Oh, I’m not physically here, but my magic is buried deep within yours now. You won’t get away from me. Your mates won’t be able to get rid of me that easily.” He said “mates” like it was a dirty word, spitting it out in distaste.

“You and I are forever. You should have known that I would find a way to keep our connection alive.” He took a step and was suddenly right before me, touching me, and I started to scream until I was hoarse.

His touch sent streaks of pain through me, making me gag. I closed my eyes to try and will myself awake. Yet all I heard was his laughter. The bastard. Somehow, he had me trapped here, mentally controlling me. Filled with terror, I couldn’t think straight. The only thing I could process was that I needed to find a way out.

As if he was privy to my thoughts, he said, “There’s no way out, my love. You are stuck with me. I control this space in your mind. You are mine until I decide to let you go. And even then, you will always be guided by me. What did you think I was doing when I fucked and sucked you all those times? Yes, you tasted delicious. Like the rarest delicacy. But it was more than that. The magic you sensed inside you, at your core, is *me*. I was transferring my magic into you while also taking some of yours into me.”

He touched my face, gripping it painfully. “While you abandoned your body and soul during our lovemaking, I was altering your magic to merge with mine. We are bonded in a way. Maybe not like your two fucking mates,” he snarled viciously, “but a connection exists that allows me to be with you at all times. The little threesome was interesting.” His voice turned ice-cold at this. His fury wrapped around me at those words.

“Open your eyes, my love.” His breath fanned over my face, and I stilled my fighting.

My fear was palpable. How could it be that I had incinerated him and he was still here? His grip tightened on me, and I stared into his eyes—those eyes I once thought were so beautiful—and I saw something there that drove real terror

into me. He was going to do it to me again. *No, no, no, no*, I chanted mentally.

“It’s time you remember who you belong to. I won’t have you fucking anyone else without remembering that. I’m the only one. Do you understand? Now, let’s get reacquainted.” His voice softened in hunger, and I lost it.

Terrible rage creeped up from deep within my soul. This motherfucker had taken so much already, I wouldn’t allow him to take more. I could feel my bond with Rhiannon and Lysander edged in panic and fear. They didn’t know what was happening, but they felt my alarm at what Donovan was doing. His hands were on me, ripping my clothing to shreds until I was standing before him naked and trembling. I tried fighting him as he did it, but nothing worked. I reached for my magic and opened my eyes as I did. Laughter greeted me as I felt his hands roughly grope me. He was genuinely amused, and I realized why. I couldn’t reach my magic. He had blocked me somehow. I was helpless as he moved to take what he wanted.

As he leaned in, I reacted instinctively: I headbutted him and heard a crunch. Although he was incorporeal, I somehow hurt him. He screamed in pain and I realized I wasn’t as defenseless as he claimed. After all, this was *my* mind and I was dominant here. Something snapped inside, and I yelled loud and long as I stepped toward him and began my assault. That motherfucker would never touch me again after I was done with him.

I was a blur of movement, hitting, punching, kicking, using everything I had learned in combat over two hundred years. I had to disable him somehow and wouldn’t stop until one of us went down. He didn’t stand still for it; we battered each other bloody. I got scraped and bruised, blood dripped from my mouth, and I could feel myself losing momentum. He was in no better shape—I had ruined his pretty face, pummeled it to a bloody mess—but he kept coming.

I was tiring fast, and suddenly he swept my legs out from under me and was on me in the blink of an eye. He put his entire weight on me and locked my arms close to my body. His eyes were dilated, I thought from anger, but then he looked at

my neck and I knew: he would finish me here. My blood called to him like no other. He'd repeatedly told me that during the time I had spent with him. He'd said it was addictive and that one day he wouldn't be able to stop himself.

I found some renewed strength and pulled my knee up and hit him right in the balls. He grimaced and grunted with the pain, but he didn't let up. I wiggled relentlessly, trying to get an opening for my arms to break free, but he had me locked down good. He refocused on my neck and leaned in closer to lick the blood off it, making disgusting grunting noises as he did. My insides were screaming for help, but I wouldn't make a sound to satisfy him. It would only excite him more. I knew from experience.

Gritting my teeth, I waited until he was completely distracted then did the only thing I could think of. As he moved along my neck, licking every drop of blood he could find, I readied myself for what would come next. I felt his fangs scrape against my neck and I jerked involuntarily in anticipation, but he didn't pierce the skin. He waited.

I didn't know what he was up to, so I waited tensely, hoping my plan would work and get me away from him. He went still, and all I could hear was his harsh breathing. I tried to move my arms again, but he had me pinned down securely. I could feel his battered face touching my jaw as he waited for gods-knew-what and I wanted to jerk away, but that would only serve to excite him more. I could feel that he was rock hard against the juncture of my thighs and didn't dare move my legs. Rage coiled in my belly, burning a path throughout my body. No way was I going to let him hurt me like before. I didn't care if I died in the process—I would fight him.

I felt his body tense and coil like a snake about to strike and readied myself. As he went for my artery, I went for his. We came together like two lions trying to rip each other's jugulars out. I got to him first but felt him pierce my skin. He was distracted by my blood and that helped me get an edge on him. I ripped into his neck with my teeth, and he pulled back in surprise. But I held on, grinding my teeth into his neck, trying to break free of his hold. It worked, but only

momentarily. Once his surprise faded, which only took a few seconds, he proceeded to grip my neck in a vise and squeeze. I locked my jaw, feeling hot gross blood filling my mouth and dripping down my chin. The fucker didn't seem affected at all, only more determined to end me.

His grip tightened, cutting off my air supply, when the walls of my mind shook violently. Startled, I lost my grip on him and he turned to look at me. He looked ravenous, like me biting him had encouraged his hunger for me in a new, unexpected way. I spit out the blood filling my mouth into his eyes, blinding him momentarily, and he moved to wipe it. That loosened his hold on me. I started fighting again in earnest as the walls of my mind continued to tremble, as if some unseen force was trying to get in. I scrambled away from Donovan on hands and knees while he busily tried to clear his vision and understand what was happening around him.

I didn't care, so long as I could get space between us. I felt a pressure rising in my head, and when I grabbed it with both hands, pain radiated from behind my eyes and the base of my skull. "What..." I sounded drunk, but figured exhaustion could do that to you, too. I didn't take my eyes off Donovan, who had turned away from me, trying to steady his feet as everything moved around us. He paid no attention to me now.

"You can't have her. She's mine!" he shouted at the empty space.

"Donyale, let down your walls!" I could hear Rhiannon's voice. How? "We're trying to help, but we need you to let us in."

The walls were shaking uncontrollably now, and I realized what was happening and why this maniac was shouting at them. My mates were trying to come in. I didn't know how bonds worked, but somehow Rhiannon was speaking to me and only me.

I kept my eyes on Donovan as he laughed like a madman, repeating that they couldn't get in and I was his. I crouched behind him, glad his attention was elsewhere. Taking a risk that he'd see what I was doing, I closed my eyes and took a



deep breath. I had built my mental walls as a protection against magic a long time ago. It was part of the training I'd received. I hadn't messed with them in over 150 years. I could barely remember how to take them down.

I imagined them in my mind's eye: tall, impenetrable stone and filled with booby traps for the unwary. I removed them layer by layer. I was halfway done when pain exploded on the left side of my face, and I felt something break. Shouting in surprise, I opened my eyes to see Donovan standing before me, a feral look on his face, rage radiating through every fiber of his body.

"You will *not* let them in. Do you hear me?" Spit flew into my face, and I backed away.

The shaking of my mental walls stopped and blinding golden light filled the space. A warrior strode through an opening followed by two others.

Donovan struck fast and hard. My neck burned as he locked his arms around me. There was no pleasure this time, only burning pain. I fought him with everything I had as I heard a roar of pure, unadulterated rage reverberate throughout the space. Lysander was here. I started to see black dots in my vision as I started to lose consciousness, but then Donovan stopped.

Fully healed, he stepped back and pushed me away. I stumbled back and fell hard on my knees. He looked as fresh as a fucking daisy, like our brawl had never happened. That was what my blood did for him. It gave him something extra, and now he was facing my mates and this golden warrior who was dressed in full battle armor. I got to my feet and skirted my way around him.

"Don't go too far, my love. I'm not done with my dinner yet." Bile coated my throat at his words, but his attention shifted to the golden warrior. The light dimmed enough for me to recognize my aunt. Terrifying fury masked her features. She looked like one of those berserkers you heard about, all reason left behind at the onset of war as the killing rage took over.

But Donovan didn't look worried. He looked eager, in fact, as he faced off with my aunt and my mates. Rhiannon was closest to me and peeled away to get to me. She reached me just as a clash of magic resounded, making my ears ring. She placed her cloak around me, covering me and looked at my wounded neck. She pressed her hands to the wound and a starlit onyx glow surrounded her. Whatever she did healed it and eliminated the venomous fire burning through my veins.

“That fucker must die.” I kept repeating it over and over. I was so focused on my anger that I didn't take the time to really look at my mate. Gripping my shoulders, she forced me to look at her. Shadows surrounded her, swirling in a chaotic mass. Drawing my brows together, I really looked at her. Her eyes were completely black, the whites of her eyes overtaken by that beautiful black opal color. The flecks in her eyes swirled as she fought hard to maintain her calm. She was gentle with me though, like I was a fragile thing. But I wasn't. I never was. I had just forgotten for a short while. Her touch stopped my chanting, and she took another few seconds to gaze into my eyes. She nodded her head once jerkily, seeing in me what I had reclaimed. I reached up and squeezed her wrist, letting her know I was okay.

In that one moment, everything else faded into the background. I could feel Lysander through the bond, worry and anger bordering on fury flowing into me. I sent back feelings of love and safety, letting him know I was fine, or at least would be. His anger didn't lessen—it seemed to only increase, and I finally took my eyes off Rhiannon to see what was happening.

They were moving so fast that I could hardly track them. I saw my aunt parry with a sword that shone brilliantly with magic, and Lysander was using a huge axe, swinging it as if it weighed nothing. Somehow Donovan had conjured a shield and a glaive, holding them off with brilliant footwork and defensive stances that kept my aunt and Lysander at a distance. If I didn't want to end him so badly, I would have admired his skill as a warrior. He was flawless.

Lysander and my aunt worked in tandem, like they could read each other's moves, and synchronized their attacks. But they were making little progress. They needed our help. Donovan might be able to hold them at bay, but with two more in the fight, he would be hard-pressed to win. It was time Rhiannon and I helped finish this. I felt her push more of her magic into me, giving me strength and giving my heart a good dose of adrenaline. She conjured a long black bow and arrow that seemed to suck all light into it. Her eyes tracked mine as I stared in awe at her weapon.

Smirking, she leaned in and kissed my lips. "I love that you think my weapon is so impressive. Now, we need to get rid of this parasite for good." She turned and took her stance, aiming at Donovan. The swirling mass of magic from the Fae fighting each other prevented a clean shot, even I knew that, but somehow Rhiannon saw through all that.

The arrow shot straight through to its target. We heard a loud grunt at its impact, but the fighting didn't cease. I could see Lysander and Athene, each taking turns attacking or defending themselves or each other. Donovan was still standing, one arrow protruding from his right shoulder, rendering his right arm immobile. Surprisingly, he wasn't deterred by the pain or the arrow's magic attacking him. Or if he was, he hid it well. Rhiannon took aim again just as Donovan blasted Lysander with a force of his lethal magic—I could hear sizzling in the air and my heart leapt into my throat.

A roar of pain and rage filled the space around us, and Donovan's maniacal laugh joined it. I tried to move to help my mate, but Rhiannon placed a hand on my shoulder, indicating I should look again. Athene had taken advantage of Donovan's slight distraction and, like the warrior-god she was, became a tornado of steel, magic and god's wrath. She pinned him—three weapons pierced his flesh: her sword through the left shoulder, a golden spear that I hadn't seen before jutting out of his left leg, and Rhiannon's arrow, still embedded in his left shoulder.

Even though he looked like some insect caught in a trap, he laughed hysterically. She bore down on him, leaning on the

weapons, mercilessly putting pressure on the wounds she'd inflicted. He said something I couldn't decipher, but Athene snarled, rage transforming her face into something truly fearsome. He smirked once and then was gone. Literally disappeared into thin air.

The shock of his departure stunned everyone into silence. We frantically searched the space, sure that he hadn't gone far. Lysander was partially transformed, using his dragon sight to find Donovan. Athene stayed silent, picked up her weapons slowly and then walked toward me.

"Dragon, stop stalking him. He is gone for now, but we don't have much time. We need to complete the transfer now while he's wounded. He isn't finished with her yet and we must contain him quickly before he can do more harm." She knelt before me, and I had to squint through the bright aura to make out her features.

She smiled and dimmed her light. When I first met her, I didn't see the resemblance to my mother, but now, as she smiled gently at me, I saw it. It was in the eyes, high cheekbones and full lips. Athene was more stoic than my mother, so her features didn't fall easily into laughter, but when she smiled, I saw some of my mother there. Tears of longing pooled in my eyes, and she reached out and touched my cheek. "It'll be alright, Donyale. I know what he is now, and we can rid you of him, but we must first get you out of here. That requires we transfer some power from your mates to you. Your friends are waiting for us to complete the rest once we get back."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Lysander reached us then and knelt on my other side, with Rhiannon behind me. He took my face in his trembling hands and leaned down, placing a soft kiss to my forehead, and then replaced his lips with his forehead. I could feel the bond full of his worry and fear, so I tried to reassure him that I was going to be fine by sending feelings of reassurance.

We stayed that way for a few moments before Athene cleared her throat. "We must begin. There's no telling when that creature will be back."

Lysander growled deep in his chest.

I patted him twice at the source of the vibration and sat up straight. “What do I need to do?”

“You need to lay down and allow your mates to touch you. I will in turn touch their shoulders to begin the transfer. You will hear soft chanting, and there will be a tremendous amount of heat and some pain. This is normal, and with your bonds sealed it should be minimal. It will feel like your body is being stretched and then contracted. This is because there will be several rounds of power transference, enough to heal you so we can move you back to the corporeal world.” She spoke swiftly and helped me lie down. She checked my limbs and body for injury prior to positioning my mates’ hands on my sternum, right below my breasts.

Lysander’s voice pierced the silence. “How much pain will she feel?”

“At first, nothing, but when the transfer extends to her friends, it will feel like she is being stabbed in her center. That’s because we need to fully open the pathway to her magic and yours. It won’t last long, and once the pathways are open, it will reduce to a low burn because we’ll be purging the taint from her magic. Everything she feels, you will feel.”

She continued positioning everyone and caught Lysander’s gaze at the end. “Are you ready?”

She seemed to want an answer, so Lysander nodded and said, “Yes, always.”

She looked to Rhiannon, who also verbalized her consent, and then me. I spoke the words of affirmation, and she nodded her head once sharply.

The chanting started, and my screams followed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I woke to birds chirping and the sounds of morning conversation outside my window. Normalcy had been missing from my life for so long that I just lay there and enjoyed a few minutes of it. I could hear one woman haggling with another about some item or other, voices raised, but not in anger. Some people enjoyed the excitement of getting a good deal and it was demonstrated by the tone and expression heard in their voices. These two were having fun.

Fun, huh. That was something I hadn't experienced in a very long time. Frowning, I opened my eyes and looked around the room. Lysander and Rhiannon were sitting at the small dining table near the window. They looked exhausted. There were dark circles under their eyes, and they looked like they'd aged ten years. Fearing something was wrong, I sat up, which prompted both to whip their heads in my direction.

"What happened?" I blurted as they moved to me.

"Thank the gods you're awake. What do you remember? How do you feel?" Rhiannon avoided my question with more of her own.

"I remember starting the transfer, and then nothing." Pausing, I took stock of how I felt. I didn't have any physical pain and, lifting my hands, I saw that I had filled out. I no longer looked like a walking skeleton.

"My body feels like it's fully recovered, but how can that be?" I looked at each of them and they looked at each other and smiled in relief.

“We had to complete the full transfer after you passed out. The damage that thing had done was more extensive than Athene anticipated. It was easier to continue with the full transfer because your barriers were down and less painful for everyone. After Lysander and I transferred enough power into you, Athene moved us to the physical plane and finished the transfer with Solara, Mara and Alexa. They’re fine, just tired and resting,” she assured me when I opened my mouth to ask after my friends.

“Athene gave us strict instructions to call for her when you woke. The ritual took much out of her. We haven’t seen her since the transfer. I wonder if she transferred some of her magic as well. Donyale, your core was almost fully corrupted.” Rhiannon paused and looked at Lysander. He nodded once and his grip tightened on my hand.

“You will notice changes to your appearance as well as ours. Your magic is also going to feel different because of the transfer of power. You now have a bit of our essence, so your magic may not work the way it used to. There are also changes you may see in us. To clear you of the corruption, we had to take some of it into ourselves. Not much, just enough to siphon off the effects it was having on you. Our power is still relatively the same.”

I interrupted her because I couldn’t process what she was saying. “So, now we all have tainted magic? Is that what I’m hearing?” My voice trembled with fear or guilt, or both—I couldn’t distinguish between the two. How could this happen? My family, mates and friends were now infected by that thing that had already taken so much from me.

“Yes, but it’s contained and will not spread. Athene made sure of that. To save you, we had to remove it, and it couldn’t be dissolved as she originally thought, so she did the next best thing. It’s fine, we all consented to it. That was the only way to save you.” She sounded happy about it. What the fuck?

“I didn’t agree to that!” I shouted at Rhiannon.

“You were going to *die*, Donyale. What would you have done if it was one of us?” Lysander shifted my attention. “You

don't get to sacrifice yourself for us and not let us do the same for you. We all knew the consequences." He was firm and unyielding in his stance. His eyes blazed a bright blue, letting me know his dragon was with him on this issue.

Sighing, I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths. What a fucked-up mess. Looking back at my mates, I tested the bonds and found that they had changed. The colors were now blended. Rhiannon had some of my gold and so did Lysander. They were solid ropes tying us together forever. Taking one more fortifying breath, I went deeper to my core. I looked at the source of my magic and was shocked to see that it had a blend of colors as well. The taint was almost completely gone; there were only a few flecks of brown in the ball of magic that made me who I was. There were also streaks of red, green, two different shades of blue—one cobalt and the other aquamarine—black opal, a lighter almost-white gold and my bright sunlight gold.

Remembering the changes to their physical appearances, I opened my eyes and found them waiting patiently for me. "Will you recover physically?"

Rhiannon smiled and it was mirrored by Lysander. "Yes, it'll take a few months, but our bodies will heal. Most of what you see are direct side effects of the transfer. As shifters, we heal much faster, but this requires magical and physical healing, which takes longer. Athene will be giving us some elixirs to help speed up the process. Alexa, Solara and Mara fared better. It'll take them weeks instead of months to heal. Still, it was all worth it."

Rhiannon leaned in and kissed the side of my mouth, and my body responded as it always did. She chuckled and stood. "Come, you need to get cleaned up." She extended her hand.

"Is that your way of saying that my body smells ripe?" I removed the covers and moved my legs to the side of the bed and heard their laughter at my comment.

"No, little one. It means that both your breath *and* your body smell a bit ripe." I snapped my head up in shock as Lysander grinned down at me. I playfully slapped his thigh,



noticing the long hard ridge in his pants, making my mouth water.

Sniffing at the mock insult, I stood stiffly and stripped naked. Hearing him choke on his laughter, I strutted into the bathroom to get “cleaned up.” I could hear them following me but shut the door in their faces and then heard them bump into it.

I laughed on the other side of the door. I felt their enjoyment and relief at my playful reaction and then went about setting the bath. As I was placing the rose-smelling oils in the bath, I noticed myself in the full-length mirror. I looked different, as Rhiannon had indicated. My hair was no longer a dark mass, but had streaks of red, blonde, light brown and blue-black. It was a kaleidoscope of color. My eyes were different, too. They had specks of green, brown, gold, blue and black opal. It was as if I’d absorbed physical and magical features from the transference of power. My face hadn’t changed, but the colors from each of my friends and mates blended in where they could.

Standing in front of the mirror, I peered more closely at myself. My body had filled out with the curves I had before Donovan kidnapped me. The traces of physical trauma were gone, but my face was thinner, more refined than before, as if all traces of my younger self had disappeared. I no longer carried a youthful look, but one of a sharp blade, tempered by my experiences. In looking at myself, I saw more of my mother than I did previously, much more like Athene.

A knock on the door startled me out of my quiet observation. “Little one, we are being requested to attend Athene. Are you dressed?” Lysander’s deep voice filtered through me like a warm caress.

“Yes, give me a few moments to finish dressing.”

That prompted a low rumbling growl from my dragon and tinkling laughter from Rhiannon. It was so good to hear her laugh and it moved through the bond effortlessly, bringing a smile to my face. I glanced at myself in the mirror as it happened and was a bit taken aback by how healthy and

carefree I looked. I hadn't expected to feel such emotion after Donovan. In fact, just thinking about him put a dark cloud over everything. Shaking my head, I quickly grabbed my trousers and top and threw them on.

I purposefully kept my mind blank as I dressed and braided my hair. In less than five minutes, I was ready and opened the door to find my mates waiting for me by the bedroom door. Their gazes simultaneously took me in from the top to bottom, blazing a heated trail in the process. Warmth pooled low in my belly, and I could feel wetness coat my panties. *I don't think I'll ever get used to this.* Their eyes found mine and they looked hungry, a steamy kind of carnal hunger I'm sure was mirrored in my eyes.

Lysander stepped toward me, and my body heated further, anticipating what would happen next. His body was flush against mine in a blink of an eye and his head dropped to my neck and he just stood there, breathing me in. His delicious scent enveloped me, and I could feel his hardness against my stomach. It made me so wet that I thought I'd have to change, but after spending several moments with his nose buried at the nape of my neck, he stepped back. His pupils were blown wide, and a small sliver of cobalt blue shone around them.

"We must soon seal the mating bond completely. My dragon is not happy that we haven't completed it." He sounded all growly, which only increased my sexual hunger.

Breathlessly, I asked, "What do you mean? Athene said our bonds were sealed."

"He means that the bonds are sealed, but they can still be broken. By performing the last step of a full mating bond, the bite, we complete the final step in bonding ourselves for life," Rhiannon calmly stated. I glanced at her and could see she was as affected as we were, but she stayed by the door. Probably a safer move given how turned on I was right now. I wanted to forget everything else but my mates, to be with them in every way possible.

Smirking, Lysander cupped my face and leaned down. He kissed the side of my mouth and then licked it. The licking felt

like he was flicking my pussy at the same time, making me moan softly in my throat. “Later, little one.” His voice vibrated through me, making me want to strip him now and drop to my knees. He felt my desire through the bond and apparently so did Rhiannon because they both groaned at the same time. Gripping Lysander’s thick forearms, I steadied my breathing and took a fortifying step back to create some space between us. He didn’t follow me, which meant he also wanted us to focus on what we had to do. Athene wanted to see us, and I wanted to see her and my friends and reassure myself they were okay. Carnal pleasure could wait, even if it was damn difficult to do so.

We left the room after we calmed our heated bodies down. That meant stepping away from each other and taking deep cleansing breaths for a few moments before heading out. As it was, I wanted to strip them both and have another round of hot sex, but we were needed elsewhere. We walked swiftly and my mind turned to our existing problems.

I didn’t know what the transfer had done to my magic and didn’t want to test it out for fear that something would go wrong. I also wanted to make sure Alexa, Mara and Solara were well. Athene, a goddess, didn’t seem breakable, but gods had been killed before and I wanted to make sure she wasn’t affected by the transfer either. Worry ate at me. Lysander and Rhiannon flanked me, and sensing my concern, they each grabbed one of my hands in solidarity and comfort and sent the same through the bond.

We reached Athene’s office and the same warrior stood outside her door. She let us in, and I was happy to see my friends were already there. I rushed over to them and they to me. We met in the middle of the office and hugged each other tightly. I looked at each one separately and saw differences: they had each taken on some of my coloring in their hair and their eyes were a different color as well, with specks of gold in them. They looked a little tired, but there were no signs of aging like in Lysander and Rhiannon.

“I’m glad you look so well, Donyale.” My aunt’s voice drifted over to me.

I looked in her direction and gasped. She looked positively old!

“Yes, yes, I know my appearance may be shocking. Don’t worry, I’ll be back to normal soon. This is the price paid for manipulating such a ritual. Come, we need to speak about what happened and what must be done now. This is just the beginning.” She sounded so ominous, and I was still trying to process her appearance. She was still strikingly beautiful, but where she had looked like a young woman in her late twenties, now she looked like an elder. Her hair had lost its white-gold brilliance and was threaded throughout with moonlit silver. She had small lines on her face, barely visible, but there if you knew how to look. Her body was still strong but stooped slightly. I felt immense sadness and gratitude at the same time. She had sacrificed so much to help me.

I approached her and she watched me like a hawk. The top of my head only reached her shoulder, but I wrapped my arms around her and held tight. She hesitated before returning my embrace, as if this was foreign to her. After she wrapped her arms around me, I heard her sigh and place her cheek atop my head. It reminded me of the hugs my mother and I had shared before I left. It felt good and I could tell she felt the same. There was a spark of recognition between my magic and hers, almost as if like called to like. I didn’t question it, just took in the moment for what it was: a show of burgeoning familial love.

She lifted her head, and I knew the moment was over. I stepped back and walked to the couch where Rhiannon and Lysander waited for me. I sat between them as my aunt took the last armchair available. My friends stood perpendicular to me, and she sat directly in front of me with a small coffee table between us. There was warm tea waiting for us and my stomach grumbled. I hadn’t eaten this morning and I was hungry. Athene lifted an eyebrow and glanced at my mates, like she was chastising them for not taking care of my needs. They looked a bit sheepish but didn’t apologize.

The warrior entered the room followed by several servants. They placed trays on the table which held pastries and fruit.

They departed as swiftly as they entered, and we took a few minutes to grab some of the food in front of us while Athene waited patiently for our full attention.

Once everyone was settled, we quietly waited for her to speak. She gazed at the harbor that was visible through the large window in her office. She was lost in thought, her brow furrowed, which made her look more Fae or human than before. But then she blinked, and the goddess was back. Her features smoothed into a mask that showed only a cool, calculating and calm exterior—all business.

“Donyale, the transfer was successful in that it will keep the corruption contained. Each of your friends and mates provided their magic and took in some of the corruption themselves to dissipate as much of it as possible. It had burrowed deep within you, embedded into the very core of your magic. That required me to siphon some of it out and replace it with some of my magic. I’m not sure what the transference will have changed in regards to your abilities. I do know that your ability Gaia gifted you remains untouched. That somehow was incorruptible, meaning the vampire couldn’t reach it, which I assume was his goal. I think he wanted to take over your soul and use that magic to blow open the portal. Make no mistake, we diluted the infection, but it’s still present. For you to be completely free of it, you must find your other mates and perform the same transference.” She stopped to sip some of her tea and, I assume, collect her thoughts on what she would share next.

I was still stuck on the fact that the infection was still present. “Wait, did you just say I need to find my other mates?”

“Yes, it’s imperative you do that immediately. The infection is held at bay for now, but there’s no telling how long it will last.” Athene placed her teacup on the table and snapped her eyes to me.

“But my contract with Giselle stipulates that I need to go to Skolos to train my gift. If I don’t go, wouldn’t that break the contract? And you said I needed to speak to the Dragon Oracle as well.” I looked at Lysander for confirmation.

His brow furrowed as though he was thinking about the potential consequences of not fulfilling the training requirement. “It could happen, yes. There was no timeframe indicated in the contract, but witches can be tricky in their terms, and she could void the contract if she feels you are in breach.”

“Can’t we do all three?” Solara’s husky voice broke the silence. “I mean, there was no time requirement for the training. What if we go to Skolos, speak to the Oracle and request a trainer to come with us to find your other mates? Would they go for that?” she asked Lysander, who looked like he was in deep thought.

“I don’t know. It’s never been done before. From what I understand, they only train on-site. The trainers don’t travel, but it’s worth a try.” He directed his response to me, even though Solara had asked the question. I looked at each of my friends and they all nodded uncertainly, but it still left one big question unanswered.

“We still have no idea who my other mates are or where to find them. This could become a wild goose chase that spans years.” I looked at my aunt, who had a slight curl to her lips, as if she was trying to hold back a smile.

“Not necessarily, Donyale. We know from the Oracle that you will need four mates to complete you and transform your magic into a weapon that can close that portal. As it so happens, the Oracle also revealed the nature of your mates.” She paused for a moment.

“What do you mean? You didn’t tell me that the Oracle told you who my mates are.” My ire rose. I was tired of not having the entire truth, and my aunt liked to drip new information like she was rationing water during a drought.

“I didn’t mention it before because at the time it wasn’t relevant. You were to return here after your training and I would have told you then. Unfortunately, things have changed, and I need to tell you the rest of what the Oracle shared.”

Athene’s stern voice penetrated my anger. Sitting back, I waited.

“As you know, you’ll have four mates, all Fae magic users. You’ve found two. One is a dragon shifter with a strong water element who also has limited abilities in three other elements, fire, air and earth. The other, your shapeshifting Fae mate, can manipulate the spirit element and has a very powerful gift. You still need to find mates that are strong in fire and earth, given your strength is in air.

“But that isn’t all: your mates are all different species of Fae. Rhiannon is not just a shifter, she’s of a specific species of shifter called *transfigurans*; they can only hold one element while shifting their physical shape into any sentient being in existence. Once they see an entity, they can shapeshift into it. Lysander is what we usually think shifters should be, shifting into a single sentient being who can hold multiple forms of elemental magic.

“Your last two mates are unique in their own way. Earth elementals have never been so powerful as the *lupinotuum*. They are the originators of what you know as wolf shifters. Pure of blood and a direct line to the first. They live in obscurity, and no one has seen them in thousands of years. It is said that they live in a very remote mountainous region in Fell, but anyone who’s ever traveled there has never returned. These shifters are massive, almost as large as your dragon here in both their human form and their wolf form.

“The Oracle confirmed that they’re in Fell, so you’ll need to travel there with your other mates to find them. Unfortunately, your friends cannot go. They have no distinct physical connection to you that would protect them from lycanthrope law. It is said that anyone who enters without an invitation—which they don’t provide—will be branded a trespasser and killed on sight. The Oracle confirmed that they’re expecting you and two mates to arrive at some point. Don’t ask me how, I couldn’t get that out of her.”

“We won’t let her go without us!” Mara jumped up with balled fists, panic written all over her face. She startled everyone with her outburst, but Alexa placed a hand on her arm and guided her back down.

“Let’s listen first and then figure out what to do.” Alexa’s voice was tight with strain, and I knew she didn’t like what she was hearing, like Mara. But she controlled it better.

“Fell is on the other side of the world.” My voice sounded small, and I cleared my throat. “It would take us weeks to sail there, and we need special permission to dock. We’ve only ever been there twice before, and it was a monumental effort to get everything in place just to dock. They’re extremely hostile to outsiders.”

“Yes, your mother and I expressed this to the Oracle. All she said was that everything was in place, and you only need to name yourself when you arrive.” Athene blew out a frustrated breath. “I cannot go with you, you know this. But this journey will be hard on you physically and emotionally. You’ll need to strengthen your bonds with your mates on the way there to ensure you can sustain each other. Fell is a harsh place; only the strongest and most resilient survive. There are mystical beasts there that haven’t been seen in other parts of the world in eons. You’ll need to be ready for anything.” Her fierce gaze met mine and I nodded.

“What about the last mate?” Alexa asked.

Sighing, she leaned over and grabbed her cup of tea once more. She remained silent for several moments, collecting her thoughts. Taking a sip, she swallowed and placed the cup gently on the table, her movements fluid and elegant as usual. “The last mate you’ll find in the wilds of Verona. There is an ancient seat of power there that has lived undisturbed and hidden for centuries. They are known as *lamia*.”

She said it quietly, but everyone stopped breathing. I couldn’t process what she had just said. I couldn’t move, my body and mind frozen at that last word. I could feel my body tightening up, paralyzed by fear.

“No.” Lysander’s rage-filled growl penetrated my paralysis. Rhiannon hissed as if ready to strike out. My friends all reacted at once at hearing Lysander’s voice.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Mara was the loudest in the room, yelling at Athene. I couldn’t move, I just stared at



my aunt, and she stared right back at me, resigned and solemn.

“There’s no way she can mate with a vampire.”

“Is this some sick joke the gods are playing?”

“How in the all-living fuck can this be possible?”

Everyone spoke or shouted at once; in the meantime, both my mates were struggling to contain their animals. Lysander was stiff, fighting for control, snarling angry guttural noises that rumbled forth from his chest. Shadows encased Rhiannon, obscuring her from everyone’s vision but Lysander’s and mine. Incredible sadness marred her features, making me panic even more. The decibel level in the room rose with everyone’s shock, reaction and fear. This couldn’t be happening...

“Enough!” Athene’s voice silenced everyone.

“I know this isn’t what any of us would want, but the Oracle was clear. To meet her destiny and fulfill her purpose, Donyale must mate with a vampire. But make no mistake: her mate will be nothing like that parasite, Donovan. The original vampires were said to have been creatures of the light. They were created in a different age that required their unique gifts to survive. They are apex predators, like the dragons and lycanthropes, but they are a force of good, not evil. Donovan was an abomination, the antithesis of what the *lamia* were intended to be. They’ve received a bad reputation because of the few rogue vampires that have appeared over time, especially Draco. I cannot say that they’re all good, because like all Fae and humans, each chooses their own path, light or shadow. And I understand your fear in encountering, much less mating with, such a creature after what you’ve been through. I wish I could change this for you, niece, but I cannot. This is the Oracle’s vision.” Sorrow lined her face.

I couldn’t respond because I’d lost my voice. I needed time to process this fully. Standing, I walked out the door and back to my room. I could feel the eyes of my mates, family and friends on me and sensed when Lysander and Rhiannon stood to follow. I stopped and shook my head, letting them know I wanted to be alone.

I arrived in my room and gently closed the door behind me. I took the seat by the window and gazed unseeingly out at the beautiful vast ocean. How I wish I could just go home and feel my mother's embrace, sheltering me from all this. I didn't understand why I had been chosen for this. I heard the door open and stiffened as I wiped the tears streaming down my face. I thought I'd told them to leave me alone! Turning to give my mates a brutal reprimand, I found my closest friend peering at me uncertainly.

I just lost it and she ran to me and wrapped me in her arms, holding me and saying nothing. I cried until my well of tears was empty and I felt hollow inside. There was no answer to my question and I knew I wouldn't get one, but it made me angry. Being at the mercy of the gods was not a gift or a blessing, but a curse. All I wanted was to get my voice back and see my family again. Instead, I was anointed with an impossible mission to save the world. *Oh, and in the process of doing that, you'll be hunted, beaten, raped and brutalized for your efforts.* Alexa stayed silent during all this. She offered comfort with her presence, letting me know I wasn't alone. She knew me best, next to Captain Beryl, who had been like a mother to me.

Alexa stroked my hair gently, almost like my mother had before I left. She finally took a big breath, and I knew it was time to talk. "You can't hide from all this, Don. You know that, right?" As she said this, she pushed my shoulders back to gaze into my eyes. I kept them closed for a few more moments. But then, I sighed and opened them.

"I know. I just need time to work through it. I don't know if I can mate with a vampire, especially after everything that happened with Donovan. He's still in here," I said, pointing to my sternum. "He's made a home in my body, my mind, and I'm supposed to let another one just like him bond with me? I don't think I can." My voice trembled, tears swarming my eyes as I spoke.

"There's a piece of him still there, yes. But it's a fractal, nothing more. We've contained whatever's left of his essence, and you survived. I wouldn't paint all vampires with the same

brush, Don. You once told me that, about judging everyone by one person's actions. Do you remember? It was when I tried to go home, and things didn't work out the way I thought they would. My sister had convinced everyone that I was a traitor and that I should die for my transgressions. You told me that not everyone was to blame for what happened and that the blame should solely land on my sister, who manipulated everyone against me. I was angry, hurt and felt like burning the world down with them in it." Her gaze shifted, looking off into the distance, remembering the pain of having her family betray her. The hurt was still there, I could see it, but it no longer had the effect it did when it happened.

"I remember. But your sister didn't become some parasite that lives in your body and forced it to betray you, making you weak and vulnerable."

"Maybe not, but she turned my entire family against me. She poisoned their minds and hearts and my name was stricken from the historical records, as if I never was. She'd always been strong in her ability to alter minds, I just never thought she'd do it to harm me. The betrayal was different, but the result the same: I was arrested, beaten and raped for my *transgressions*."

I started at that. I hadn't known. All this time and she had never told me.

"How then could I ever move on? I was exiled, reviled, violated in ways I'd never thought would happen." She looked at me then, eyes hard, jaw tight and boiling anger near the surface, ready to explode.

"You live with it, never forget, but you move beyond it. You won't at first—it'll be hard—but you'll survive, even thrive, once you find a way to cope. I'm not saying it'll be quick or that those memories won't surface when you least expect, but you can rely on the same thing I did: friends. And moreso, your mates, who will be with you every step of the way." She stopped abruptly, as if she had more to say but forced herself not to.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I gazed determinedly into her eyes, trying to find the answer.

“Because it would have only hurt you, Mara and Solara. I left on my own against your advice and I didn’t want you blaming yourself for what happened.” She dropped her eyes to her hands, which were now intertwined in her lap. “There were many times I wanted to talk, but I couldn’t. When Leanne joined us, she noticed something was off and approached me. She helped me speak about what happened, but I made her swear she wouldn’t say anything to you or the rest. This was my burden, and I would bear it. She’s kept her commitment to me, and over time, she’s been there for me when the demons come out.” She glanced up and a small smile appeared.

“Enough about me and what happened. The only reason I share this is because you’re much stronger than me and can figure this out. You have people here with you that want to help, so let them. When the time comes for you to meet with your mates, you’ll have us to back you up. Let’s take this one step at a time. Okay?” She grabbed the top of my hands in a tight grip.

I turned them and threaded my fingers through hers. I didn’t know where to start, but it would have to be somewhere. Why not here? “I was never much of a quitter.”

She huffed a laugh at that. “You don’t know the meaning of the word, Don. Let’s not change that now.” There was sadness in her tone, but I understood. Talking about scars hidden from everyone was painful.

“Thank you for telling me. I know you would have taken all that happened to you to your grave. I won’t tell anyone about what happened.”

She nodded once. “Talking about it helps, you know. I was in a dark spiral before Leanne came to us. Do you remember when I was especially destructive, wild even? It was probably several months after I got back from that visit home.”

I nodded, remembering how worried we’d been. We thought she had a death wish. That was over a hundred and

fifty years ago. The memory was a bit hazy, but the emotions that the event had spurred on weren't.

“I think you need to talk to someone, not just your mates. They'll only get angry at themselves for not being there. You'll feel their emotions through the bonds. Solara, Mara and I are here for you, as well. But if I were to give you any advice, speak with Leanne first. When I spoke with her, she explained that her education and experience spanned more than the physical manifestations of pain and trauma. She's trained in helping people overcome their psychological trauma. There's much she hasn't shared with us, Don. There's more to Leanne than meets the eye. But I think she means well, and she'll keep your confidence. She's kept mine all this time.”

She reached up and tucked a stray strand of hair that had come loose from my braid behind my ear. “How do you feel now?”

“I'm not sure. Not as desperate as when I came in here. Thank you for being there for me. I needed that.” Sighing, I looked out the window, thinking about everything Alexa had just shared. I couldn't run, I knew that. I needed to talk to my mates and family. I was terrified, but I wasn't going to let fear guide me. I never had. I wouldn't start now. Lips trembling with trying to hold in my fear of what the future held, I looked at my best friend. Her light-bronze skin, deep auburn hair and blazing golden eyes grounded me. *I can do this with them by my side.*

A soft knock sounded, and I knew Lysander and Rhiannon were asking to come in. Alexa looked to me to invite them in. Her eyes shifted between mine, trying to determine what I was thinking, I'm sure. I dipped my chin slightly, letting her know I'd heard her. “Come.” Thank goodness my voice was steady.

My mates immediately opened the door and walked in, Lysander first. My heart skipped a beat every time I saw him, thrumming in my chest like it was about to jump out and attach itself to him. He found my eyes and held them; love blazed through the bond. There was a little fear bleeding into it, but it was for my well-being. He was concerned for me. I

sent love and reassurance through the bond, and I could see the tension ease from his large frame. I shifted my gaze to Rhiannon and felt a well of warmth through the bond, a deep trust. My love for each of them was different. Lysander fired my blood and made my heart race just by being in his presence—the attraction was visceral. Rhiannon was subtler, more like I was basking in the sun. Both made my core heat up whenever they were near. I just wanted to stay here, in their presence, like the they were my life source, forever. But I knew that wasn't an option.

I slept fitfully and dreamt that I stood on a cliff over a meadow that I knew somehow, though I'd never seen it before. I saw massive snowcapped mountains framing the meadow and a large bean-shaped lake nestled in between the massive peaks, mirroring the beauty that lay before me. Verdant green pine trees layered the ground as far as the eye could see. In the distance, the mountains touched the blue sky on one side, the forest blending in with it on the other.

It was a wondrous sight, one I could stare at forever. I glanced up at the clear blue sky; the color reminded me of a robin's egg, pure crystalline blue with no cloud marring its surface. I took it all in, memorizing it to recall when I woke. This place was paradise.

Turning away from the ethereal landscape, I looked behind me. I was surrounded by massive pine trees, their scent permeating the air, calming me as I took deep breaths. In the distance, I saw someone moving. I started toward the individual, wondering who would be in my dream. Thinking it was one of my mates or friends, I moved faster.

As I drew near, I realized that I didn't know this person. From where I stood, I could make out that it was a woman, a very petite woman. She was wearing men's clothes and a large straw hat that covered her face. Her back was to me as she worked in a flower garden. Her hair was about the only thing I could see, which was thick, wavy and falling down to below her hips in a kaleidoscope of warm colors: browns, reds, blacks, honey. I walked closer to her, wondering what she was doing in my dream. Who was she?

I was about ten feet from her, and she hadn't turned to face me yet, but at that distance I could make out her profile. It was hard to focus on her; for some reason my eyes kept sliding away every time I tried to look at her face. The harder I tried, the more elusive it became.

She finally stood and looked at something in the far distance. "It won't work, you know. There's a reason you cannot look directly at my face."

Her voice startled me. It was strong and vibrated through my body when the words hit the air. Shaken, I asked, "Who are you?"

"I am mother to all and yet none. I have lived for millions of years, protecting the most precious of my most beloved creations from all others. I have loved and lost, lived and died many, many times over. I am the creator and the destroyer. I am Gaia."

*She could have just stuck to, "I am Gaia,"* I thought to myself. No way was I saying that out loud. She was a god, one of the Ancient Ones, if what she was saying was to be believed.

Unconvinced, I plowed ahead. "Why are you in my dream? What do you want?"

"What an odd way to speak to your progenitor." She turned fully to face me, and pain speared my eyes, going straight through and hitting the back of my skull as if needles were being repeatedly injected into it. I fell to my knees, holding my head, eyes tightly shut. The pain eased after a few seconds, but tears still blurred my vision when I tried to open them again.

"I don't have much time with you, Donyale. It takes a considerable amount of power to pull you into my domain. I understand you're skeptical of what I say, but maybe this will help." She stepped toward me and I automatically cringed back, thinking she would attack me.

"I won't hurt you, quite the opposite." She touched my forehead lightly and the pain disappeared. She touched it again and a flurry of images flooded my mind, like a reel of

memories. I couldn't make sense of them, they flashed so quickly and then were gone.

"I've given you the gift of our history. You won't be able to access it until you need it. I've also cleared your magic of any remaining taint that lingered outside the cage Athene placed around that viper. He's locked away until you can complete your mission. And once that happens, you'll have what you need to purge him from your soul. It's a matter of priority that you find your two remaining mates. I fashioned your four mates to fit your exact needs. Without them, you will fail. I know Athene shared this with you already. What you don't know is that if you don't mate with them, you and your current mates will face mortality. Your magic will erode until it is no more and you become human and, like all humans, die."

"I have every intention of finding my remaining mates. But the vampire...I don't know if I can bond with him. My visceral reaction is to fight anything that resembles Donovan. That's not something I can control. At least not yet." My voice sounded small, like a child's.

I dared to look up at her as she touched my hair. I could see her clearly, and she took my breath away. There was no doubt she was a god; there was nothing I'd ever seen, including this meadow, that compared to her beauty. She smiled gently and nodded. "We're all made up of our experiences, the good and bad. Some more painful than others, and some more joyful than others. You are a survivor, and you will survive this. You must."

"That's super helpful." My mouth just couldn't seem to stop today.

Her hearty laugh echoed across the meadow. How something so bold could come out of such a small woman was beyond me. "You're right, I'm giving you advice that has already been given to you. So here's something that no one else will tell you: The experience you had with the vampire needed to happen. The transference of power was required to give your magical core what it needed to begin its transformation. As it was, you would never have grown strong



enough to close that portal, nor strong enough to defeat your father. He has borrowed magic that is only meant for the gods, making him the most powerful Fae in all the realms. Notice I said ‘realms,’ not just *your* realm. He has spent many centuries building his strength and as it was, you would have perished along with every one of your loved ones.

“No, what happened was necessary. There were several paths that I could have forced you to take in order for a transference to occur. This one was the least painful.” She had been looking off in the distance again as she relayed this. When she stopped, she gazed down at me, clear-eyed and with no regret marring her features.

“You mean, you made sure I was set on the path that allowed that parasite to feed off me, rape me and then invade my very essence?” My voice shook with my rage.

“Yes, but trust me, the other options would have completely broken you. In this, at least you survived and can recover, if somewhat painfully. I didn’t do this to hurt you, Donyale, I did it to prepare you. There’s much that still needs to be done, and much that you will fail and learn from. Be prepared.

“My time with you is running out. I have one final gift.” She turned away and walked to a bench a few feet away. I hadn’t even noticed its presence. Her small physical presence did nothing to hide the enormity of her power. She radiated strength and a scary level of magic. Her aura was a thousand times brighter than anything I’d seen, including Athene’s.

“You’ll need help getting into the two territories where your remaining mates live. They are part of insular groups, both of them, that do not take kindly to strangers in their territory. They kill on sight.” She walked back with something in her hands that looked like a golden chain with something dangling from it.

“This will protect you and give you passage into those lands without harm. I have two more for your bonded mates. It will let strangers know you are under my protection and any harm that comes to you will be answered with swift death by

my hands.” She said it so matter-of-factly, like we were discussing the breakfast menu, and that made me uneasy.

“I’m as old as time, Donyale. We handle our business with less emotion and more objectivity. Wiping out a few thousand members of a tribe to protect what’s mine is economical. I’ve waited eons to build a creation such as you, endowed with a small bit of my power. You are mine, Donyale, my creation, my descendent in a way. Although you don’t carry my blood, you carry something far more important: my magic. I protect what’s mine.” Her voice changed in the end, emotion bleeding into it, fierce determination underlying the last three words.

I nodded because it was the only thing I could do. She had given me several gifts. All I could do was accept them gracefully.

“We’re almost out of time. I have one more item for you to give to Leanne. I have called in a favor from Hypnos and he has provided me with a recipe for a sleeping draught that Leanne must prepare for you. The trauma you experienced won’t want to release its grip on you, especially when you dream. This draught will help you rest deeply and keep the night terrors away. It’s vital that you be rested when you embark on your journey, for it will be one where you will need your wits about you. This sleeping draught cannot be taken every night, so use it wisely.” She handed me a folded parchment.

“Wait, what do you mean the draught can’t be taken every night? Why not?”

I could feel the changes around me as the dream began to fade. I found myself confused over how I was going to take these physical gifts she’d given me to the waking world. I clutched the pendants and the parchment tightly in my hands and looked once more at Gaia’s face.

My mind couldn’t grab onto her features—they seemed fuzzy and indistinct. She reached out once more and touched my hair, gently again, and I felt immense comfort and peace. Then everything disappeared.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

I woke up sandwiched between Lysander and Rhiannon, both gripping me tightly around my waist and shoulders. My head was resting on Lysander's chest, his arms around me. I could hear the soft thudding of his heart and Rhiannon's warmth surrounding me from behind.

I blinked several times, trying to clear my mind of the dream yet at the same time trying to recall it. I glanced down at my hands and found the pendants and parchment gripped in each. Frowning, I tried to puzzle out how that could be. Physical manifestation of items from dreams to reality should be impossible.

I lay there, listening to Lysander's heartbeat. It calmed me further, luring me back to sleep. Rhiannon shifted behind me, pulling herself closer to me, as if we might become one person. Even in sleep my mates felt the need to be as close as possible. Sighing, I found a better position to place my head where I could hear my dragon's heart sing me to sleep while wrapped in the arms of my shapeshifter, protecting me from physical danger.

For the first time since my return, I fell into a dreamless sleep.

## EPILOGUE

We flew over the vast rainforest, the place where I was taken. It looked like a large emerald jewel to our eyes. I had never flown before, but Lysander had insisted that to get to Skolos we would need to fly. He wasn't taking any chances. Rhiannon had agreed and so had everyone else. The only ones that didn't accompany us were Athene and Leanne. Not that I expected Athene to. She had explained that she would help us from Amoralia—well, as much as she could from afar.

Lysander, Jaron and Sorya carried us, with the exception of Rhiannon, who flew next to Lysander as a beautiful ruby-red dragon. I think she shocked all of us when she shifted. Somehow I hadn't processed the fact that she could shift into any sentient being. She was skilled at flying, that much was evident. Smaller and nimbler than Lysander and his guards, she was easily able to keep up and flew with an acrobatic skill that made the others grumble.

We had stayed for another week at Madame Pauline's before departing. I spent the time trying to find the old me. Leanne found me during a particularly frustrating moment, when I felt that I was never going to figure things out. She took one look at me and asked to walk with me. She said nothing as we walked, but her presence alone helped calm my emotions. She asked me just one question, "What do you want for yourself now?"

I couldn't answer because I really didn't know. I wanted to live without the pressure of this "gift." I wanted to go back to

what life was like before it manifested. I wanted the last few months to disappear. But I also knew that was childish. So, I said nothing. Leanne said nothing as well, just gave me a small smile and walked away, leaving me in the lush gardens that my aunt apparently loved spending time in, for I found her as I continued to wander through them.

She looked sad, sitting by herself. Lonely. I guessed it must be lonely, being in her position and with her power. I could see her profile from where I stood, but I dared not intrude on her privacy. I turned to leave, but she saw my movement and turned. “Donyale? What brings you here?”

“Leanne asked to walk with me and then she abandoned me. I was keeping her company.” Of course, I didn’t tell her that she’d found me on my knees, my hands tightly closed into fists, tears streaming down my face over my inability to move beyond recent events. I had quickly wiped my tears and acted as if I was fine, but she saw through it.

“Ah, the good doctor. She is quite skilled you know. Are you still leaving tomorrow?” She had turned back and was staring off into the distance, so I stayed where I was.

“Yes, we’re making final preparations. We’ll go to Skolos first as we discussed, then come back here to set sail and find my other mates. I miss the crew and look forward to seeing them soon.” My heart yearned to be back at sea, sailing toward far away shores and experiencing new cultures. What I wouldn’t give to go back in time and make different choices. I barely stopped myself from wishing for something I couldn’t have, but my emotion must have shone through in what I said because Athene turned to fully look at me. She didn’t smile, nor did she have any clear emotion written on her face. She had her neutral mask on.

“To be angry at the fates is normal, Donyale. But don’t let that anger consume you. You may think that all of this is unfair and that it should not have happened to you. I’m sure you have repeatedly asked yourself, ‘why me?’” She paused and stared into my eyes; even from a short distance, my soul was exposed.

I cringed because, yes, I had been asking that question. It wasn't fair. I had lived with no voice for two hundred years, and now another, larger burden had landed on my shoulders. One I didn't want. Immediate anger and frustration burned through me, so hot I could feel my body temperature rising. She stared at me as I tried to control my emotions.

“Many have asked themselves that question. Persephone, for one. Helen. Hera, even. I'm sure many men have as well. You must be able to manage your emotions, Donyale, and come to terms with your fate. If not, your magic will become unstable, and you could harm not only yourself but those you love. Yes, you have every right to be angry, but shit happens, and then you must deal with it. Your story is not a personal tragedy—if you fail to fulfill the destiny the fates have designed, it will be a tragedy for everyone. I don't say this to put pressure on you; I say it to put things in perspective. Look at the glass half-full, niece, not half-empty. Think about how you can use these emotions to help yourself instead of letting them fester inside of you.” She spoke calmly with little to no expression bleeding into her features.

“I appreciate the advice, Aunt, even though I didn't ask for any of it. I'm fine and will see this through to the end, even it means *my* end.” I turned and left without another word. Everyone kept thinking they could just give me advice, tell me how to feel. Well, fuck them all.

The next day we met early with the crew, my soul lightened at seeing all the beautiful faces, full of life and ready to go on to the next adventure. We ate breakfast together, using the time to catch everyone up on our plans without going into too much detail around what led us to this point. I wasn't ready for others outside our small group to know what happened over the last few months and probably would never be ready, if I was being honest with myself. I walked around and spoke individually with each of my crew mates. I managed to spend more time with Leila, learning about her time as the crew leader and applauding her efforts. She did a wonderful job according to Alexa, keeping the crew together and operating as one while we were gone. The ship was seaworthy. In fact, Mara verbally expressed her appreciation

for the improvements that were made by the crew during the gathering. High praise indeed coming from her.

The time spent with the crew lightened my mood, helping me realize that perspective was important. While things happened to me, I could choose to dwell on that or focus on the bigger picture. My mission now was to protect my crew from what was coming. If I just stayed true to that, the decisions that I make would be easier to manage. I could handle my pain if it meant that my crew survived and thrived in this world. This is what Athena wanted me to understand.

I didn't see my aunt again. She didn't come to see us off, and a little worm of guilt wriggled in my chest. Sighing, I stepped toward Lysander, and he placed his large hands on my shoulders. "Have you ever flown before, little one?" His normally midnight-blue eyes were bright cobalt as he asked the question. His dragon wanted to hear my answer.

"No, I haven't," I whispered. The fear of flying wasn't something that I had experienced because I had never had the need to fly.

"We'll take it slow, then. You can climb onto my back and sit between my spinal ridges. Find a spot that you feel comfortable in. It's like riding a horse." I snorted when he said this, because his dragon was nothing like a horse. His dragon looked affronted as well, for his eyes blazed bright blue at the insult.

Laughing, I nodded. "I'll be fine. Just don't do any acrobatics in the air."

He gave me the most brilliant smile and then kissed my forehead.

Rhiannon sauntered up to us as I took in my surroundings. We were at the edge of the forest, our bags and supplies lying close by. I looked at my friends, and Jaron and Sorya were speaking to them in serious tones. They were probably getting instructions.

I would ride Lysander and the other dragons would take my friends with the exception of Leanne. She had decided to

stay and prepare for our journey to find my other two mates. My aunt chose to help her. My nerves about flying started ratcheting up. I was scared to be that high up in the air with little to nothing between me and *splat*.

Lysander placed a finger under my chin and turned my face toward him. Rhiannon was standing next to him, but at arm's length. I looked up at him, craning my neck because he was so close. He tilted my face a little further and leaned down, giving me a kiss that lit the fires inside me in a way that made me want to drag him into the jungle and strip him naked.

He branded me with the kiss and then stepped back. "It's time." He turned to Rhiannon, who nodded.

She shifted first, and I was amazed at the creature she became. Her scales glistened like volcanic fire, bright ruby red and so pure in color that it defied nature. I guess that was one of the perks of being a shapeshifter—you had the ability to control the color of your skin as well. Amazing!

I stepped toward her and ran my hands along her flank, like I would a horse. She turned her enormous head toward me and looked at me hungrily through those black opal orbs. I guess my touch was a little more intimate than I thought because the next thing I knew, a loud purring sound was emanating from her.

Lysander laughed and began strapping the supplies to her back. "She's getting turned on, little one. Best to keep your caresses to more innocent areas. Dragons are very sensitive along the flanks. Don't touch her horns, though. That may kick off a mating call." He said all this with laughter in his voice.

Turning to Rhiannon, I could almost sense her raising an eyebrow, challenging me. I shook my head and stepped back to admire her beauty. She had explained previously that when she shifted, she took on all characteristics of the animal. So, Lysander's comments rang true.

She was solid red with streaks of black along her spine where small spikes rose up along the ridge of her back. She was on all fours like a horse, with huge membranous wings folded alongside her rib cage. Her tail was about thirty feet in



length alone and ended with a series of long, vicious black spikes that glistened in the sun. Her face was decidedly feminine, but so symmetrical that she looked like a work of art. There were two onyx-colored horns that curved up and back from the top of her head, giving her a sleek look. Impossibly, she had long, dark sweeping onyx eyelashes that matched her horns and the ridge of her back. Her four massive feet sported black claws, so shiny that you could use them as a mirror. Sharp and deadly, they still looked like something the gods had made, beautiful yet capable of cutting you in half with no effort whatsoever. She was breathtaking.

It took several minutes to strap our supplies and luggage to Rhiannon. Lysander patted her shoulder affectionately once he was done. She turned, huffed at him and, after he stepped back, lifted her face to the sky and leapt up to gain height. I stared in awe. That was my mate.

Lysander watched with me for a moment, then spoke softly. "It's time, little one. Your friends are mounted and ready. Are you ready to fly?"

I took my eyes off Rhiannon's acrobatics in the air and looked at Lysander. My beautiful male. He was all chiseled, all masculine features that were sharp, yet softness edged his full lips and around his large cobalt eyes. His dragon was watching me, waiting. Taking a deep, fortifying breath, I nodded. "Ready as I'll ever be." Smiling, he leaned down, kissed me softly then walked to the clearing and shifted. He was massive, several times larger than Rhiannon.

I had seen Lysander in dragon form before, but always in battle. I'd had little time to admire his beauty. He was a wonder to behold. His scales shimmered from an iridescent blue along his underbelly to a blue so dark it resembled the deepest ocean along his spine and tail. Silver streaks marked the spikes along his spine, like lightning racing down his back. The back of his skull sported six massive horns that pulled up and away from his head. His cobalt eyes watched me take him in. I hadn't realized that I had walked right up to his face. I reached out and touched him right below his left eye. He closed his eyes and purred, just like Rhiannon, only louder and

deeper. I laughed at hearing it. He blinked his eyes open, and it looked like he grinned.

I ran my hand along his flank and he moved his wings to allow me space to walk along his side. His scales were warm, so I leaned in and placed my face against his ribs and heard the loud thumping of his heart. I felt warm all over, inside and out.

He was mine and I was his. I kept reminding myself of that. Bracing my nerves, I tapped his side to let him know I was ready. He lay down to give me access and I climbed onto his back and found my seat. And then we were in the air. Nothing prepared me for it. Nothing I could say could describe it—it was pure terror followed by pure delight.

WE HAD BEEN FLYING FOR SEVERAL DAYS WHEN WE FINALLY sighted Skolos in the distance. Lysander seemed to speed up at the sight of his home. Several dragons were patrolling and saw us coming. They approached us and through their unique telepathic communication spoke to Lysander. Each of the dragons was about half the size of my mate, but they were still huge, and bigger than Rhiannon. They spent several moments inspecting us and then escorted us to a landing platform. We landed and dismounted so the dragons and my mates could shift back to human form. As soon as Lysander and Rhiannon shifted, I handed them their clothes, which I had carried in my pack.

A group of what looked like soldiers or guards approached. They stopped in front of Lysander and bowed. “Your Royal Highness.” I could see his jaw clench at the greeting. I stopped checking in on my friends and turned back to face him. What the hell?

“It’s been several months since you departed. The King and the Crown Prince wish to see you straight away.” The guard still hadn’t taken his eyes off the ground, looking at Lysander’s feet. He was almost as tall as my mate but fell a bit short by several inches. As a matter of fact, all the guards—including the two women—were extremely tall. Maybe it was a dragon shifter trait. I was still trying to make sense of the

title they used for Lysander..."Royal Highness." It seemed my mate had some explaining to do, and that made me nervous. What else hadn't he told me?

"I'll be along shortly. I need to make sure my party is safely fed and housed—"

Lysander hadn't even finished before the guard rudely interrupted. "They will be accompanying us as well, Your Grace. They are to be questioned once the King has had a chance to speak with you." Lysander looked at me and something like panic flashed in his eyes before his mask came down. What the hell was going on?

"Fine. Lead the way, Captain." His voice was tight and very formal, emitting little emotion. Puzzled, I followed behind him and the rest of our party behind me. Rhiannon came alongside me and laced her fingers with mine. She made eye contact with me. Her reassuring smile and the love she sent through our bond reminded me that I had my family here with me, and that was all that mattered for now. I could hear Solara and Mara whispering behind me already, taking in the beautiful landscape and the massive city walls we were walking toward.

Taking a deep breath, I knew that together we could handle what came next.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M.R. Staxx is a dark romantic fantasy author with a focus on strong female heroes who kick ass and save the world. Her books take readers on fantastical journeys through magical worlds filled with danger, love-filled passion and adventure. She believes in empowering women and promoting diversity in fiction and is committed to creating stories that inspire and entertain.

She lives in the United States and when not feverishly working on her next book, she spends her time reading, traveling with her husband, being a mom to four kids, caring for four dogs and working her day job.

Join her on her next journey and experience the magic for yourself!