

FALL MOUNTAIN SHIFTERS

HADES'S
WOLVES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

G. BAILEY

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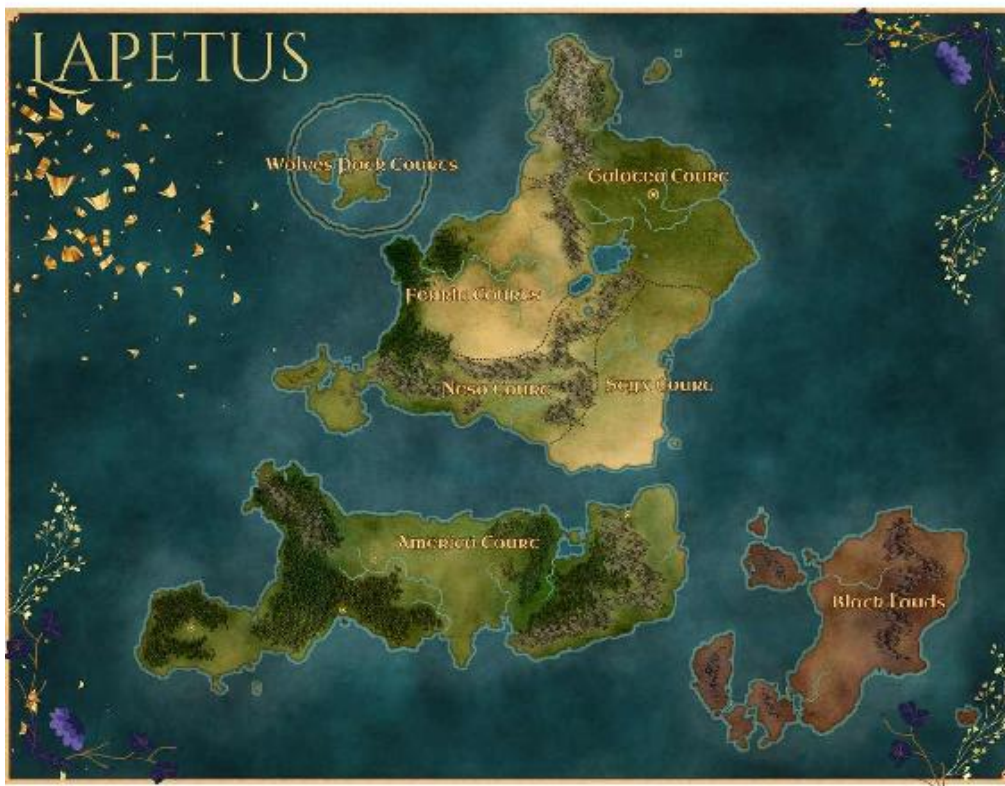
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Map



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Edited by Polished Perfection.

Cover design by **Jineus Covers**

Artwork/chapter heading/background images by *Samaiya Art*.

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Description

**I was once a rejected wolf, and now I'm the queen of the
Fall Mountain Pack.**

I'm their alpha female.

After escaping King Cenwyn and his court, I find myself back with my alphas, who are now my mates. I have everything I've ever wanted and more, but the gods have a different idea of freedom for me. Persephone's using the soul bond to connect to my mind and control it, but none of us knows what she truly wants. King Cenwyn's armies are at our borders, and he isn't alone.

The Levi are now an army, controlled by an angry goddess, and if we aren't careful, she will destroy us all.

We endure the fall and rise in the ashes.

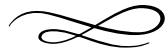
Fall Mountain Pack will not stay down for long. Wolves always bite back...

This is a full-length reverse harem romance novel full of sexy alpha males, steamy scenes, a strong heroine and a lot of sarcasm. Intended for 18+ readers. This contains Her Night Wolf, Fall of Embers, Reign of Embers and Lost Embers + Exclusive Bonus Scene.

Dedication

To you, may you find your Fall Mountain Pack family.

Prologue



PERSEPHONE WITH HADES, IN THEIR END.

“**THEY SAY** I’ve gone mad, but you’re still here, still fighting for me in the darkness that sweeps our world apart.”

My words float around the stillness of our home, hidden deep within the city walls that will hold, even when we die within them. We will die in this place, but we won’t ever leave the prisons that await.

The darkness shimmers as he walks out of it. Smooth golden skin, dark eyes like the night sky, he shows nothing but flawless beauty. He was born to bewitch the world into the shadows. Hades has always taken my breath away.

He never pauses as he walks to me. No fear, no hate for what I’ve done, just love.

His cold hand tilts my jaw up, forcing me to look into his eyes, and once I’m there, I can’t look away.

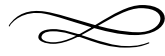
“You’re only mad to those who do not understand the darkness. I breathe it. I adore it. I love you, Persephone. No matter who wishes to come between us, no matter the curse of the seven, nothing and no one will come between us.”

My voice breaks, just like my heart. “I wasn’t strong enough. I couldn’t—”

“Shh, my love,” he coos, stroking his hand up into my silky hair. “All mortal things come to an end, and even we cannot fight this. Our love will be as eternal as our souls.”

I rest my head against his chest, and he holds me, even as we both struggle to accept the ending that we have been given in this life. The Wolven gods have cursed us, and it's all my fault...but I will find a way to fix everything.

One



THERE IS no peace in the darkness without my alphas.

Something hot, scented of death, coats my hands, and I become keenly aware of the familiar sickly feeling as I wake up. Everything's just spinning around me, reminding me of the times I would spin around with Ragnar under the tree outside my house. This time there is no laughter, no joy, as I reach for my mates...and even that deep bond is blurred. My head is banging like it was hit with a bat, and there is a dull headache that won't quite go away even as I try to focus my thoughts. What in the name of the gods happened? My mind spins as I try to focus on where I am at least. The scent of death that lingers in the warm air is mixed with the metallic tang of blood, the fresh wood scent of books, and old dust. My wolf howls in my mind, stretching and itching like she's been locked up, and her strength pushes the dizziness away just a little more. I can't focus my eyes, relying on my other senses, but I can't sense much over the smell of blood and books.

I remember being with my mates after the mating, connecting with the pack, and feeling the pack bond. I should be able to speak to them right now...and it scares me that the bond is so silent. Terror for my mates freezes my heart as I remember everything in harsh, jagged memories that assault my mind, making the headache so much worse. I remember hearing Persephone in my head, her voice so strong, like she was really in this world and far more real than the connection our souls has, as she ripped my soul apart to make room for

herself. The crown, the Apple of Discord, was all the power she needed to breach this world and take my body over.

“Wherever you are, Persephone, I’m so done with your bullshit! Goddess or not, this is my goddamn body!”

My shout echoes around wherever I am as things start to look less blurry. Persephone doesn’t reply, which is a blessing, considering she can lock me out of my own body, and slowly I see the high bookshelves of the library, the familiar books, and warm shadows. I’m lying on the floor, facing a row of books that are all a faint purple, aged and worn down with a light sprinkle of dust covering them. Sitting up, I glance down at my hands that shake from sheer fear of what Persephone has done. My fingers are covered in silver blood, and so is my white dress and black cloak wrapped around my shoulders. I didn’t put these clothes on. I feel sick as I stare at the blood, almost terrified to look around with the pressure of the guilt choking me already.

Small snow-white flowers bloom at my feet, and I follow a path of them, disappearing down into the shadows of the library, along with drops of silver blood dotting the path. I crawl to my feet, walking past the flowers, which change from brilliant white to rose maroon purples. They glow with their own light, and the further I go, the more flowers there are, until I find a collection of them blooming around a small broken table. One of the legs has been snapped, and now there are so many flowers crawling around it, moving like they are alive.

But on the table is a pretty little creature. Dot. Her grey hair matches the pool of blood around her waist where a dagger is completely pushed all the way through her stomach. The dagger is so big that it’s ripped her apart, but she’s still alive as her wide eyes look at me. Flowers are blooming around her on the table, and I realise they are growing from her blood. Life growing from her death. There is something beautiful in it, even as the sight of her makes me want to fall and beg for forgiveness.

Persephone—well, I—did this.

I'm not aware I'm even moving. With nothing but a roar filling my ears, I crawl over the flowers and kneel in front of the table where Dot lies. She looks like a broken doll, crushed, and her white eyes are lacking the glow of life I've always seen in them.

"Who did this?" I gently ask. I don't want to ask, knowing the answer already, but I need to know. I feel like I can't breathe until I do. I search for my mates one more time, but there is nothing but a dull buzz where the bond should be.

"You, but not you, Astra," she breathes out, her voice cracking and struggling.

"I should call guards, or anyone, to get a healer, and we—"

"My fate is written in the song of time, like yours, and no healer could fix me."

I don't really know what to say to that, but I don't call for anyone. Dot might not have said it, but no one should be alone while they die.

"Why did Persephone do this?" I whisper.

"I have much to tell you, Astra. Much," she begins, finding some strength to even speak. I know these are her final words, and the only respectful thing I can do right now is to listen and remember them. That's all anyone wants, in the end, to be remembered. I can't save her, and I doubt any god or healer in this entire pack would know how to. "My daughter was sweet and born under three falling stars, each of them a blessing to what she would become. Smart. Beautiful. Pure."

This story reminds me of my own names and the reason my mum gave me them. "She was born in spring and was everything the stars could have told us mortals of beauty and grace. She was so beautiful, and I named her Persephone because she reminded me of a particular flower that I always saw on the brightest of days."

I go still, my thoughts racing a million miles a minute as I process what she just told me. She is Demeter, the mad goddess I saw in Persephone's memories. Her mother who didn't want her with Hades. I'm speechless. "I became more

frightened every month that passed when she grew to adulthood, that the other gods would notice her. I lost her to Hades as you well know.”

There is so much bitterness in her voice. I swallow hard. “I didn’t always used to look like this, by the way. This was once a doll I gave Persephone as a child, and I was cursed by Hades and Persephone to be trapped in it forever, bound to a library full of dead trees. Do you know what that is like for me? Goddess of nature and everything living? This is hell.”

I struggle for words. “Why would she do that to her mother?”

“I deserved it,” she replies, her voice flat.

“You truly believe that?” I question.

“Yes,” she replies, her voice stronger than a second ago. “I started and fought in a war to get my daughter back from Hades. He took one look at her and fell in love, and I think she loved him, too. But I didn’t understand that, back then. I assumed that he’d taken her by force, tricked her mind as he could, and I killed anything in my way to get her back. I killed so many, and there is so much blood painted on me that it would flood this entire castle. Don’t feel sorry for me, Astra. I am a villain in the hearts of so many, including my own daughter.”

“Then be a hero and help me. How do I stop Persephone from controlling my body?”

She faintly smiles. “Hero...that is not a word for a god or goddess. We are all power, all destruction and nothing more.”

I don’t believe that for a second. She tore the world apart, killed for her daughter, and that comes from love. Even if it is the twisted kind. “Persephone never let me close to her, never let me understand her life, and she certainly told no one but her dark god her secrets. Everything she did was for him. She loved him as you love your alphas.”

“And you loved her,” I reply. “And she did this...”

“Yes,” she softly replies. “I do not hate her for it, and neither should you. She’s been many things, my daughter, but

in her heart, truly deep down, she is good. Mad, but good.”

I don't think a statement from Demeter about being good is really worth much.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” I quietly question.

“No. Only the ones that cursed me could kill me and set me free. I don't know whether my daughter did this as a payment or a kindness, but I am finally to be free from this library.”

I stay silent as she looks away from me and up to the ceiling, her breathing laboured. “When I'm gone, you need to ask the library for what you need, and it will show you all its secrets. Thousands of years' worth lie in here, and any help you need can be found in these books. Books are a greater power than the gods.”

“Thank you,” I reply, watching as a single tear glides down her yellow cheek, so much paler than I've seen her before.

“To stop Persephone, if it's even possible, you should speak with the Wolven gods. If anyone could tell you that, it's them, and they will answer your call. Your blood will secure the connection not many ever have,” she softly tells me, her voice like a summer breeze. “We will meet again, Astra. Do what I could not and save her.”

Demeter's eyes glaze over, and she breathes out deeply one more time before going still. Her blood still drops, making more flowers that are growing up on the bookcases and shelves. I swear I see her spirit float up in the air, nothing more than a shimmer in the air that feels like all the seasons in one. The heat of summer, the crisp air of autumn, the freshness of spring, and the brittle chill of winter.

“We endure the fall and rise in the ashes. Leave Fall Mountain Pack in peace and rest with the gods, Demeter. You will be remembered.”

I sit in the flowers, watching her dead body until I feel nothing but the warmth of the library soaking into my bones, and my tears falling off my cheeks onto the flowers. I just

watched a goddess die, and despite the horrors she committed, I feel a deep sadness that she was gone just like that.

There isn't a single sound in the library, and I swear it is mourning with me as the shadows seem to tighten and go cold. I pull off the cloak from around my shoulders, and I cover up her small body, closing my eyes as I do for a moment. The blood on my hands makes my body shake, and I try to ignore them and look away as I search for the bond. The emptiness and sorrow and fear end up knocking me to my knees as I gasp for air.

It's one thing to have your enemy outside the walls of our pack, but it's another to have an enemy literally taking over your body.

I wrap my arms around myself, feeling my power lashing out in streams around me, picking up strands of my air in the breeze.

Persephone won't win. I've been through too much and have too much to lose to let her push me to the side.

The second I decide to fight, the alphas' bond connects to me like an electric current, snapping us together once more. Whatever magic kept us apart hasn't worked for long. My mates. I can feel them attached to my soul, bonded deeply to me and woven so far into my heart that there isn't an end of me and a beginning of them. We are one. I instantly feel their panic, their urgency as they search the castle for me, like it's my own.

I hear their voices inside my mind, each one of them more panicked and frantic as they search for me, coming to a pause when they sense the bond burning to life one more time.

"Mai, where are you? Talk to us," Henderson all but begs, pleads, and it hurts my heart to hear the raw worry in his voice.

"I'm here, in the library of the castle," I send back to them, each of them, testing this new level of communication.

"Are you okay? Why did you leave?" Valentine asks, his voice so worried. Instead of telling them, I show them in my

mind everything that has happened, projecting my memories to my mates. I feel their emotions, from fury and panic to feral rage at Persephone for this.

“We are coming,” Ragnar growls into my mind, sending goose bumps down my arms.

“Come for me, my mates,” I reply.

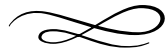
I hear a whistling of wind, and I look up just in time to see a book falling down in the air, and I step back seconds before a heavy book slams down at my feet. “That could have hurt me!”

My shout echoes around the library, but no one responds. If someone did, I think I would freak out. I lean down and pick up the heavy book, which has a gold “WG” stamped into the worn, aged leather at the front with various flowers, pillars, and stars. I open the book, and it’s nothing but thick, blank paper. “An empty book? Is this meant to be a metaphor for writing my own story or something?”

I feel my mates getting closer as the book begins to glow a light green, the same energy and feel as my powers from Persephone. Slowly, flowers draw themselves across the page, and the word “Wait” appears in the middle of them before they all disappear back into the blank paper. Great. A book that needs time to load is just what I needed when my pack is at war, a crazy and possibly evil goddess is taking over my mind and body, and my daughter could be taken at any second by a male I don’t know or trust.

I still hold it tightly as I walk to my mates and hope to the gods above that Persephone doesn’t take over me again... because what if she never lets me go?

Two



I BARELY SET a foot out of the library before Valentine sweeps me off my feet, holding me tightly to him and breathing in my scent. I look over his shoulder into Henderson’s aquamarine eyes shining in the dim corridor light as he looks me over. I feel his relief, love, and worry like it’s my own, and I soon realise it is coming from all of them. Valentine is slightly trembling under my touch, and I reach up, tilting his head so he looks at me.

The intensity in his gaze takes my breath away. “You were gone, completely gone, Mai. I—we—felt nothing. Nothing from our mate. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, couldn’t move. I froze in terror, and then you just appear. How?”

Hearing his pain cuts through my chest. I don’t have time to tell him as Silas and Ragnar round the corner, and I’m pulled from Valentine’s arms into Silas’s, his lips branding me with a knee-shaking passion. When he breaks away first, I’m left a little hazy. The book, which was in my hands, dropped onto the floor.

“I’ll show you,” I whisper into their minds, using our mating bond like it’s always been there. It doesn’t feel new, it feels natural and perfect as I smoothly push my memories into their minds, showing them everything that happened with Persephone and Dot/Demeter. They stay silent, and I feel their emotions slip from shock to anger and to sadness for Demeter.

Ragnar moves first, walking up to me and nudging Silas aside, who growls low at him. Ragnar cups my cheeks and

looks deep into my eyes. “You feel so scared, my mate, and I never want you to feel this way again. I remember you, us, almost everything. After we mated, Hades knew I needed to remember, to be the alpha I was before I lost my memories and be who you need. I’m here, you are safe and loved. We will fix this together. Persephone is not the only god in this castle.”

“We are Hades, and you will not be taken over by anyone. I don’t give a fuck who she is,” Silas growls. “You are our mate.”

“We will fix this,” Henderson breathes out. “You’re not alone. You never will be alone when you face your battles, because they are our battles too.”

I blow out a breath as my heart feels like it could explode with how much I love them. We are in this together, and they are my mates. I never thought we would get to this, to have a chance of a good life as mates and rule a pack that could literally change the world for the better. We have everything to fight for. I have my mates to fight for.

“I think we first need to understand how she could take over and why,” I suggest.

Valentine muses. “It was the crown. The gods likely knew they were going to be bound to mortal souls in their afterlife, at some point, and maybe she left her future mortal self a key to unlocking herself.”

“It feels like being bound to us is a punishment,” I say. “But who could have been powerful enough to punish gods like this?”

“That’s an answer I’m not sure I want to know,” Henderson states. He isn’t alone.

They all look at me, and I shiver under their gaze, Silas looking me up and down. “That dress... Are you cold?”

“A little—” I start to admit when I feel *him* coming closer. My spine locks with the threat, and I turn to the dark corridor, my alphas moving around me as they sense him, too. My senses seem stronger, likely from the mating, and there is no

hiding how immense and ancient his power feels. It feels wrong to me, and my wolf wants me to leave, to get away from him, but I force us both to hold our ground.

For Serendipity.

Draycian, the alpha of Mnemosyne, strolls down the corridor towards us, not a flicker of fear in his expression. “Well, well, well. Don’t you have an issue now, alpha female Mairin Fall? Or is it Queen of the Wolves? The Falling Saviour. The Goddess of Death. Your people certainly like to call you by many names.”

Silas runs his hand down my back, sending shivers down my spine. “Either way, you should be on your knees before her.”

Draycian’s expression goes cold. “There is only one female in all the worlds I will go on my knees for, and it is not her.”

“What do you want?” Valentine growls.

Draycian smirks at him. “Such a temper, alpha. It must be difficult to have your mate controlled by a mad goddess.”

I place my hand on Valentine’s arm when he takes a step forward. We all are losing patience with the trickster, and I’m sure he actually likes taunting us. “What do you know about Persephone?”

He straightens his jacket, leaning against the wall. “She never did like to share, and that should make you very nervous, young alpha female.”

“You knew her, then?” I question.

“Yes, of course I knew her. I was here before they even existed,” he says, crossing his muscular arms. “The Wolven gods did make an awful mistake creating those poor gods and goddesses from mortals they favoured. They always wanted children to play with, but then the children started destroying everything they created, and they became an issue.”

“Did they deal with them?” I ask.

He flashes me a sugary smirk, a look that could fool any wolf into thinking he is nothing but a sweet-faced lamb. I'm sure many females have fallen for those looks. "That part of history...well, even I do not know the answer. The gods disappeared, and the next I saw of them was you."

"Do you know what the Wolven gods are?" Henderson questions. "There is very little history of them in our libraries, nothing more than songs and rumours that make no sense."

"Want to make a deal for that information?" he purrs.

I growl. "No more deals."

He almost pouts. "You should know exactly who the Wolven gods are, Mairin Fall."

"Stop talking in riddles," I snap, feeling my powers rising with my temper.

"To tell you what I know would take centuries, and it wouldn't be as fun as riddles and deals," he all but taunts.

Silas growls, wrapping his arm around my waist. "Be respectful to my mate, or I swear to every god ever born that you won't leave this corridor alive. I don't give a fuck how old you are."

He straightens up off the wall. "I'd like to see you try, alphas. Our fight would level this city, and you still wouldn't win."

They all growl at that, the sound making the hair on my arms prick up.

"Enough," I say, cutting them off and stepping forward out of Silas's arms and protection. "What do you want?"

"Serendipity, of course," he responds. "I'm ready to take my part of the deal. You have to pay up, alpha female."

I bare my teeth. "No."

He isn't taking my daughter anywhere, and I'm done being threatened by him.

He snarls at me, and the alphas do not like it, judging by how the shadows in the corridor start to tinge with red magic,

and I don't have to look behind me to see they are controlling the very air around us, dropping us into darkness. But the darkness doesn't scare me, not when it's theirs and they are mine.

Draycian shows no reaction to the alphas' power, keeping his eyes on me. "I feel there's danger brewing in the air for this pack, a danger that she might not survive."

"Why do you care so much?" I demand.

His eyes turn even colder. "We're leaving. Someone must keep her safe so she has a chance to live. You might be her mother in name, but you constantly put her in danger and—"

I don't see anything but red, see anything but the alphas' power around me, and my power lashes out of me in a way I've never felt before. Persephone's power has always been slow, soft like a gentle wave, easy to use and manipulate into whatever I wanted. This time, when I reach for it, it's like a dangerous flood of fire that explodes out of me, and I slam it straight into a wide-eyed Draycian. The dark green magic tinged with black darkness hits him like a truck and sends him flying across the corridor, slamming hard enough into the wall that he goes right through it. A puff of dust is all that is left, and my body sparks with green magic as I block out everything but fury ruling my body.

She is my daughter, my pack, and he doesn't get to judge me.

"Mai..." Henderson whispers, but he sounds far away, and I don't stop walking towards the settling dust and the gap in the wall where Draycian went through. The dust is pushed away with a blast of air, and Draycian stands on top of the rubble, looking very pissed off. He is something different, something dangerous, and a little tinge of fear shackles itself to my heart. His skin ripples like water, slowly changing into gold scales that cover every bit of skin I can see. His ears change, turning into spiked ends, and silver horns grow out of his hair, curling up. His eyes almost turn completely into slits of pure gold, sparkled with ice.

But the most shocking thing to me is his large gold wings that stretch out behind him. They aren't like angel wings. These look tougher and less bat-like, more scaled, and covered in sharp points at the edges. They are huge, hovering just above the ground.

“What in the gods are you?” I end up whispering.

He snarls at me, and I swear his tongue is forked at the end. “She is mine.”

“I'm her mother, her family, her pack,” I shout back. “Touch her, and we will have a serious problem.”

The alphas move to my side, and Henderson and Silas take my hand, locking our fingers. This time, Draycian seems to look at the real threat in the room. All five of us. Their power doesn't need to be a show. It's a gentle warning from the shadows that they will fight for my daughter. Our family. There is nowhere in the world that can escape their shadows.

“Seems to me you care about Serendipity,” Ragnar muses to Draycian.

Henderson agrees. “And if you care about her at all, hurting her pack and her mother isn't going to get you anywhere.”

“You could fight me, and I promise the second you do, my daughter will disappear and you'll never see her again,” I vow. I already have a plan with my sister, who will take Serendipity out of this city and hide her. There is a secret passageway out of the city, one only known to the alphas.

He looks between all of us and snarls one more time, his eyes burning with cold anger. The scales fade away first, then the horns and wings, until there is nothing but a very powerful male standing before us. I don't know what he is, but something inside my chest certainly fears him, and I will not be letting my daughter go with him.

His eyes hold nothing but a stark warning. “I will stay to see out this upcoming battle. If she is harmed in this delay, you will deal with me.”

He walks away, disappearing into a blast of gold light, and knee-buckling relief flows through me that we have sorted that issue for a little while. “That bought us a bit of time to find a way out of the deal.”

“And find his weakness,” Silas smoothly adds.

I cry out as a sharp pain lances through my mind, sharp and deep. I start to feel myself being pushed out of my mind for her as she pushes into my soul. I close my eyes tightly, fighting her with everything I have until I can’t stand the pain anymore. Warm magic washes over me, and I open my eyes, seeing nothing but darkness around me. I can’t see them in the darkness, but the pain ebbs away, and she leaves as the darkness settles around my body like a shield.

“She doesn’t get to take you from us,” Silas says into my mind, through the connection.

“No one does,” Ragnar agrees.

Valentine’s hand strokes down my back as the headache dies away, and I suck in a deep breath of air.

I nearly collapse when they stop using their magic on me, but Silas catches me, picking me up into his arms and holding me tightly to his chest. “She won’t get in anymore. Not with us around.”

“For now,” I whisper, knowing it’s a Band-Aid at best. Especially when the war is coming up and they are going to need to use their power for more than protecting me from myself.

“It’s time to rest,” Silas tells me. “My beautiful mate.”

“You take her,” Henderson suggests. “We will check on everything and call the council to set up a war meeting. We need to plan.”

“Love you,” I softly tell them all, pushing the thought down our bond. Silas kisses the top of my head before taking me away, heading down the corridor. The castle groans and seems to stretch in the cold wind as we head down the familiar passageways. We come to our room, which is guarded by five

wolves in armour and deep red cloaks. They all bow their heads, and two of them open the door for Silas to walk in.

“No one but the alphas come in,” Silas commands as he heads in.

“Yes, Alpha Silas,” one of the guards replies and closes the doors behind us as Silas places me on the bed. Silas strips off his trousers, leaving him utterly naked and completely gorgeous as he climbs into bed and tilts his head to the side, a playful look in his eye.

“Mate...come to bed.”

I don't need to be told twice. Silas deeply chuckles as I rush to the bathroom, and I pull off the white dress, throwing it to the side before washing my hands of all the silver blood. I try not to be affected by the sight, but my hands still shake until it's all gone. I know it's not my fault, that it wasn't me who killed her, but I still feel guilty like I did something. The alphas will have someone take her body, and we will bury her somewhere special in the castle.

She deserves that. Everyone does.

I look at myself in the mirror, the black alpha female marks a stark contrast to my pale skin. My hair falls in waves around my shoulders, and my green eyes seem lighter than before. I touch the alpha female marks, a reminder of everything I have to lose. Everything I have to fight for.

I suck in a deep breath and go to my mate, needing him close to me. I'm barely on the bed before Silas pulls me against his chest, and I interlock my legs with his as we face each other, and I run my fingers through his silky, ash blond hair. His eyes, the same colour as my favourite season, search my own. His voice is soft. “I never want to be apart from you again. Not even in my mind.”

“Me neither,” I whisper back. “She killed her mother. What does that make Persephone? I used to always think that she was good, but now I'm not so sure. I'm scared of what that makes me if she is evil.”

He brushes a featherlight kiss across my forehead. “She can’t be all evil. Not when she’s a part of you, because you’re the purest person that I’ve ever met.”

I lean up and kiss him, needing more of my mate, needing the connection between us even as his words heal the deeply broken parts of my soul. He brings me to life. Silas groans, tightening his hands on my hips to the point of pain as he lets me pull myself on top of him, rubbing our bodies together in the process. Both of us shiver. He strokes his hands down my bare back, cupping my ass and rubbing me against him, sending sparks of pleasure through my body.

“Do you know, my mate, our hearts beat the same now?” he questions. My heart races as he strokes his fingers up my back and cups the back of my head. “I can feel you with every breath, every beat, every second. I fucking love it.”

“I love you,” I tell him. He growls as he flips us over, kissing me like he is starved for me. He rips at the sheets between us until he settles between my legs, my thighs parting for my mate.

“Good girl,” he groans against my lips as the tip of his cock presses into me and he feels how wet I am for him. He inches inside, and when he is fully seated, we both sigh in pleasure, in how perfect this feels, how right.

He starts moving, thrusting hard in and out of me, and tempting me towards the crest of my pleasure. I dig my fingers into his forearms, and he flips us once more, leaving me on top. I sink down on his cock, and he grabs my hips to stop me from moving.

“Show me how you play with that perfect pussy of yours, Mai,” he demands. My cheeks burn, and he grins, pure masculine confidence. He takes my hand and places my fingers over my clit. The pressure makes me tighten around him and I love his expression, a mixture of pleasure and torture. “Now.”

His demand sends shivers down my spine. He is my alpha. He is my mate. I don’t pause as I start rubbing my clit while he is hard inside me, and he watches every circle I make. I’m

panting, clenching around him as I feel myself getting close. “Not yet. You don’t come until I tell you to. Gods, you look so fucking sexy right now, Mai. I could watch this forever.”

“So bossy, Silas,” I breathe out, teasing him as he knows I’m loving it. He can feel me. He starts to slowly thrust in and out of me from below, the sensation a tease all on its own. Sweat falls down my spine as I try to hold on, try not to come, and it’s borderline painful.

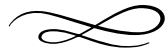
He deeply chuckles. “I love when you say my name. Especially when my cock is buried inside you.”

Before I know it, I’m on my back, and he thrusts hard inside me. He knocks my hand away and grabs it, bringing my fingers to his mouth. He licks each one before looking down at me, and there is something so hot about him doing that. I can see he likes how I taste from the look in his eyes, the lust and male satisfaction I find.

“Come for me, Mai,” he commands, and he loses any control he had. With a growl that vibrates all the way down to my core, he thrusts in and out of me, hard. I cry out as I come, tightening around his cock, and he groans, his cock growing larger and adding to my pleasure before I feel him coming inside me. He kisses me softly, gently. “My mate.”

“Forever,” I whisper back as he lies on my chest, and I hold him, wishing nothing in the worlds ever breaks us apart.

Three



THE DOOR IS SLIGHTLY OPEN, a light, chilly breeze blowing through the gap as I nudge it open and stand in the doorway. Jesper Ravensword is sitting on the edge of the bed, facing away from me, and for a second, I think back to how he used to sit on the end of my bed at the foster house, swinging his legs as I read him books about a human child who found another world inside a box in her room. He loved that story, and he loved me reading to him. I enjoyed our time together too, from snowball fights to cooking terrible food. All of it was a light when I needed one, and I'm not sure he ever knew how much it meant to have one person in that pack treat me as a family like he did.

His dark hair falls down to the shoulders of his old shirt that smells like it hasn't been washed. Like he hasn't changed or touched anything that has been given to him.

"Scrubs," I whisper the nickname I used to call him. His spine stiffens, but he doesn't respond, doesn't move otherwise, and acts like he is hollow to the world around him. The guards and royal maid assigned to Jesper told me he has been like this since he got here, and Phim told me he was worse on the train.

A broken little boy.

I don't move from the doorway. I will not push in his space and demand he speak to me after everything that's happened. He must be so frightened and confused. He reminds me of myself at twelve, with no memories and running through a forest alone. "It's your birthday tomorrow. Did you know that?"

Or the birthday we made up for you because you liked it better than your old one. Nine years old.”

He doesn't reply, but the shadows in his eyes say enough.

I know Sylvester must have filled his mind with a million different things about me, about this pack, about the apparent “monsters” we are. He's only a kid, after all, and he would have been so easily manipulated by a true monster like Sylvester was. I know because I was once a kid myself, manipulated by him. He may have been the same age as me, but a monster is always a monster. I watch Jesper quietly, waiting for his spine to relax just slightly enough for me to feel like I can even talk more. “I was told you haven't changed clothes or slept in the bed. You don't leave this room.”

He still doesn't respond, and my shoulders sag a little.

I met up with Trey before coming here, as I missed him, and popped in to check on Serendipity. Serendipity was fast asleep, so I didn't get to speak to her, but watching her sweet face was a prize enough. Trey hugged me for a solid twenty minutes and chatted about a million different things he has done over the last few weeks, including checking in on Jesper, who won't speak to him or anyone unless he asks for food. I'm glad to hear Jesper is eating at least.

I have twenty minutes before I'm due to be at the war meeting my mates and I are leading, and I'd put off seeing Jesper for as long as I could.

I owe him an explanation.

“Can I come in?” I quietly ask.

He doesn't look back at me, his shoulders slumped but his body tense. “You're the alpha female of this pack. You don't need permission to walk into this room when you own it. It's your room, Irin.”

“I'm not coming in unless you tell me, and this is your room, Jesper,” I firmly state. I try to keep my voice as open and understanding as possible. My hands shake with the urge to rush over to him, hug him tightly and tell him everything is

going to be okay...but I can't do that. I know he doesn't want me to do that.

He stays silent for a while before he gives me a tiny nod. I blow out the breath I didn't know I was holding as I walk into the room. There's a little white wooden chair by the open window that looks over the waterfall, filling the room with the scent and sound of falling water. I sit down on the chair, crossing my legs and resting my hands on them as I look at Jesper. He doesn't look back at me, and I don't expect him to. "It must have been terrifying for you, to be taken in by Alph—Sylvester and to live that life in his court. I know you must have seen and heard things that scared you. I want you to know I'm here to talk, to get angry at...anything you need. I want you to know that the moment I found out you were taken in by Sylvester, I wanted to rip the Ravensword Pack apart and take you."

He lifts his eyes, bright blue with tiny sparks of hazel. "I was not scared."

I don't believe him, and I'm not sure he even believes himself. The truth is in his eyes, in the look he gives me. I would have been terrified at his age and too proud to admit it, too. Wolves are a proud bunch, especially males.

"Sylvester told me that Mike is dead and that you saw it. I need to know if that's true?" I say, my question lingering in the air.

This seems to get a reaction out of him, a deep one that flashes in his eyes. Pure terror. He almost shakes from head to toe, and I sense his wolf pushing to the surface. "Yes, I did see him die. Sylvester spent hours killing him in front of me because Mike tried to save me, he tried to get me out. He came for me not long after you disappeared. We were all told you had an accident and fell into the sea. Alph—He pretended to be upset about it, and Mike was who he took it out on."

He thinks Mike's death is because of me.

Poor Jesper.

“The last thing Mike said to me was to find you and Daniel. But Daniel is dead, and I’m not sure why I thought you could keep me safe, but I did, and I hoped for so long. Dreamt that you’d come for me. But then you never came for me. Months and months passed, and I was still in that pack, still his ward that he trained to fight until my hands bled, and hurt my wolf until he is scared to even let me shift into him anymore.”

Tears fill my eyes. Gods, it’s so much worse than I thought. “Jesper...”

“I knew that I was a tool to be used against you. But I don’t think he ever realised that I hate you just as much as he hated you. You both were monsters in the end to me.”

I stand up. “That’s not fair, Jesper.” I wipe the tears from my eyes, his words cutting into my chest like a knife. I move to the bed and sit next to him, trying to ignore how he moves as far away from me as possible. “There isn’t a day I haven’t thought about you. There isn’t a day I haven’t regretted that I wasn’t strong enough back then to save us both. I was rejected, beaten, and thrown into the sea off a cliff. How I survived in those waters...is a mystery to me, but I feel like I was saved to have a chance to fight for this future. Yes, he took you as bait to use against me, because he knew I care about you and that I love you. I always will do. You’re a foster kid just like me, Jesper, and I care about you. You know exactly how that pack treated me, so when I got to the shores of the Fall Mountain Pack, I couldn’t quite believe it was true that alphas aren’t born evil. I didn’t believe that wolves could be treated equally and fairly, and no one makes them take a mate. They are not forced upon each other by some remains of magic in a pool. Yes, there are fated mates in the world, but they are rare and not chosen by the moon goddess. What I’m trying to tell you is that my life was complicated, and there is an endless story about what happened and why I didn’t come for you, which I will explain to you when you are ready. But we both know you don’t hate me. You resent that I didn’t come for you, and then when I was there, I was a prisoner. And that I left without you again. For that, I am sorry, Jesper. If I could have saved you sooner, I would have done.”

He looks at his feet. “You couldn’t save me, because you were with them, those alphas that came to Ravensword with magic. They are even more terrifying than Sylvester.”

I smile. “They may look like it, but between you and me, they are big softies inside.”

His lips twitch, and I chuckle.

“They will protect you because they love me, and I love you. They would protect you because you’re a child and one of their pack, even if they never met me. They are good alphas and males, Jesper. I know you’re angry, and I know you’re frightened, and this entire pack is strange to you, but I swear you are safe.”

“It’s not safe,” he whispers. “You dragged all of us here to die. The angels are coming for us, and the guards whisper that we are outnumbered and cornered.”

“The guards don’t know everything. Leave the war to us,” I smoothly suggest. I make sure he is looking into my eyes. “Cornered wolves bite back. We are the Fall Mountain Pack, and we do not cower under their wings. We endure the fall and rise in the ashes.”

“That’s what everyone says,” Jesper replies.

“It’s the saying of this pack. Your pack...if you will accept us,” I gently say.

He looks away. “How long did you know angels existed? Were you lying when you said you didn’t remember your past, because Sylvester told me you grew up with the alphas of this pack.”

One day, we both aren’t going to have an inch of fear in our scents when we speak or hear his name. Today isn’t that day, it seems. I clear my throat. “My memories only just came back, and I was not lying. I didn’t know angels existed until one quite literally flew down and kidnapped me.”

“You’ve been with their king all these weeks, haven’t you?” he asks.

I place my hand in the gap between us, his little hand near mine. “Yes, but it was to save us...but, Jesper, you don’t need to worry about these things. I’m your alpha female, your friend and pack. I will fight for you, and I won’t let anyone ever hurt you again.”

He nods once, and I smile. It’s progress. Slow but sure. “There’s a female outside called Emily, and I want to send her in when I leave. Every child in the city is given a guardian if they don’t have parents, and royal children particularly are looked after by a royal maid who is trained as a guard. She’ll be here for you, protect you and help you learn anything you want.”

“Like to fight?” he questions. “And maybe...well, I do like the food here. It tastes better than anything we had back home—in Ravensword.”

I nod and tenderly smile. “The food is better. I’ll get someone to bring you one of my favourite desserts, Scrubs. You’ll love it. I think the cooks are tired of making it for me after training.”

He lightly smiles. “You used to trip over your books in your room, and now you’re here, in leather and wearing glowing weapons. It’s weird.”

“I’m weird, kid,” I chuckle.

Ragnar’s amused voice floats down my bond. “If you’re weird, what does that make us?”

“You don’t want to know that answer,” I reply back with a restrained grin.

“It’s time for court, Mai,” he whispers back before fading away.

“You’re talking to your alphas,” Jesper states, a hidden question in his words.

“There is a court war meeting soon. They are making sure I’m on my way,” I truthfully tell him.

“Sylvester said the alphas don’t worship the moon goddess and instead, they worship a dark god. That they are evil, and

they have corrupted you,” he whispers. “That they are rotting your soul with their poisonous lies.”

It’s an effort not to snap and defend my mates, but I close my eyes for a second. “The moon goddess is another name for Persephone, and I am soul bonded to Persephone. She is me, and I am her, and the Ravensword Pack was built on a lie.”

“And this pack?”

“This pack was here before any of us were born, before the gods came back with us, bound to our souls. This pack is going to stand long after us, and they aren’t evil. You only have to walk the streets to see that, Jesper,” I kindly tell him. “There is true peace here, happiness, freedom and love. There are laws that keep everyone safe and happy, not just the alphas. As for the alphas...” I breathe out. “Well, they are Hades, the god of darkness and hell. Four pieces of his soul, to be exact, but it’s wrong to define darkness as evil. So much evil is done in the light too.”

“How would you know they are good? They could be evil, and this all could be lies,” he questions, a hint of panic in his voice.

“Do you really think the girl that sat with you for hours and read the same story over and over until you fell asleep is evil? I was there to hold you through the thunderstorms because you don’t like them. I made you terrible porridge and made sure it was extra lumpy, because that’s the way you like it. No honey, nuts, or anything else on top. I am still that girl who watched over you, and that isn’t changing.”

It’s going to be a long road to convince him, but I’m not going to give up. Not anytime soon. “I’m still Irin, and you’re still my Scrubs, and I’ve always got your back.”

I stand up and smooth my hands down my sides. “I’ve got to go. Can I let Emily in?”

“Sure,” he casually replies, but it’s a big step, and I’m so happy he agreed. He looks up at me. “Who is the kid that keeps coming here and bringing me clothes and snacks?”

“That’s Trey. He is the ward of the alphas and, well, me,” I say, “just like you are.”

He nods and I walk to the door when he whispers something I wish I didn’t hear. “Sylvester claimed that I was his half-brother from his father’s side. That I was the bastard-born child of his dad. That’s why he took me in as his ward, not just because of you, but because I was literally blood to him. His last relative. One day, could you tell me about his father? What he was like?”

I place my hand on the cold door handle. He is an alpha heir and Serendipity’s uncle. Gods.

“I will, but we need to keep that between us for now. This isn’t the time for the pack to know,” I gently tell him. I will tell him, but when he is older, because any stories I have of his father are not good. Not kind. He was nearly as evil as his son. Nearly.

He nods. “I don’t want anyone to know...not when my brother was...well, him.”

“You aren’t him,” I breathe. “I’ll be back soon to see you.”

“Goodbye, Irin,” he replies, his voice lighter, like telling me his secret has taken a weight off his shoulders. It takes a lot to completely push the new information to the back of my mind, for now. I slowly send a message down our bond to my mates, who are no doubt listening in. Silas replies for all of them. “We will discuss that new information later. But come and save your mates from endless talks on battle formations before we die from boredom.”

“I can feel you pouting,” I reply. “Poor alphas.”

That gets me a dark chuckle with a teasing promise for later. Even with the humour, I can sense their tension and frustration. I quickly speak with Emily, a red-headed female wolf not much older than myself, and leave her going into Jesper’s room as I walk over to Breelyn, who is waiting for me.

She bows and I frown at her. “I’ll kick your ass for that in training. You don’t bow.”

“Wasn’t sure if the rules hadn’t changed now you’re officially the alpha female,” she mocks with a wink. “You’re certainly glowing.”

I nudge her shoulder as we head down the corridor, five guards encircling us for protection while there are so many strangers in the castle. These three floors are being kept for just our close family and select guards, but the alphas still want us all with extra guards for now.

“How is Callahan?” I ask.

She looks away. “His usual snarky self. He is healing fast now and training already. I know he wants to see you.”

“I miss seeing his grumpy ass around,” I say, and her lips twitch. “But training is easier when he isn’t there bossing me about. Can’t say my muscles are excited about his return to training.”

She chuckles. “Are you ready for this meeting?”

It doesn’t escape my notice, her obvious need to change the subject. “Not exactly, but I’m going to fake it until I make it. I’m alpha female now, and I fought for this, for them, and I won’t ever shy away from my duties to this pack. Talking of pack...”

She waits. “I’d like to make both you and Phim my omegas officially. Tomorrow. If you’ll let me, that is.”

Her expression goes serious. “The alphas asked me to be their beta, and I’d be honoured to be your omega. Both positions...I will try my best to be deserving of.”

“It is our honour to have you,” I tell her. “Without you and our family, we would be nothing but wild wolves. It’s family that makes a pack.”

“I don’t know, sometimes being a little wild in certain areas of our life isn’t all that bad,” she says, winking at me. One of the guards coughs a laugh into his hand, and another one hits his arm, nearly shoving him into the bookcase. All I can think about is how he might have damaged the books. We round a corner, coming close to the court meeting room and the dark, mustard yellow stained glass doors.

The guards spread out around us as we come to the door. There is so much riding on today as I stop in front of the doors and look at Breelyn, her eyes shining brightly, and there isn't a flicker of doubt in her gaze. She believes in me, like my alphas do, like my pack does. I can feel them, the millions of leaves on a tree in my mind. It's beautiful and daunting to have this connection to them all, and I know, without a doubt, that any of their deaths will haunt me unless I do everything I can to save as many as I can from Cenwyn. Bastard.

It's not going to be easy to convince a load of stubborn wolves who haven't fought in a war in a thousand years to fight for us young and untested alphas. Not for the first time, I wish Aunt Reine was awake. We could definitely have used her right now to help us guide this war meeting, this mess of a court, to help us follow in the footsteps of things that they've set about for years and got in place.

As the doors open and I stand still, light pouring upon me, I speak the holy words of the gods. "I vow to the gods to speak only the truth within these halls and during this court."

"Welcome, mate," Henderson's dark voice fills my mind as I walk into the room, Breelyn at my side as she repeats the words after me, binding her to this room for now as much as I am bound. Both of us are kitted out in thin black leathers that have been made by the wolves of our pack, crafted over years and strong enough to stop even a wolf's bite. These new outfits have been made for the alpha female and her omegas, but each of ours are a little different. My leathers have red vipers curled in around my shoulders, pomegranates and moons drawn into the leather in silver. Swirls, mimicking my alpha female marks, wrap around my thighs and wrists, and over my chest is the symbol of my pack: the upside-down mountain within a circle. My hair is half up, held with silver moon-shaped clips and tiny jewelled slides, and the rest falls down my back.

I feel fierce. I feel like an alpha female not to be messed with in this outfit.

The look the alphas give me, the sheer desire and passion burning within their eyes, tells me they like the outfit, too.

Their lust is strong enough to make my knees weak, as I feel all of it through our bond without even needing to scent the change.

If anyone else notices it, they don't say a word, and they are silent as we walk in. I glance at Breelyn, whose leathers are a dark blue, so dark it might as well be black, and stars are drawn in silver all down her arms and legs. She nods at me, making it clear she is here if I need her for anything.

We pause at the front of the pathway as the doors stay open behind us and two more court members, plaza leaders, come in to say their vow and sit down. They aren't betas any more, not unless we invite them to be, but they are voted-in leaders. We still need them on our side.

"How is Persephone?" Breelyn whispers. "I've been so worried about you."

"The alphas...they're using their power to bind her within me. It's a constant drain on them, but it is working. I'm worried about what happens when the war comes, because they will need all their power to help us fight," I whisper back. I'm sure many of the wolves nearby can hear us, but it's not a secret in this castle, between plaza leaders, what is happening with us. We have been asking them for information on how to stop Persephone, and nearly all of them are reading every book on the gods they can find to help us.

"There is someone else with a lot of power who could help," Breelyn softly suggests. "But he seems really pissed off with you at the moment. What did you do?"

"Be a challenge to him," I whisper back. "I could really do with his army helping us fight this, but he seems like a right selfish bastard, and I'm not sure he's going to come to our side. Out of spite, he would let us all die."

"If you call him a selfish bastard, he's probably not going to help you, you know," she suggests. "Even if you are right and you were missing a few more choice words about his... personality. God help whoever turns out to be his mate."

"Rather them than me," I mutter.

“I’ll talk to him,” she says. “He doesn’t really listen to anybody, and he’s a king in his own right. Stubborn, old, but he is obsessed with your daughter. Absolutely obsessed. He wants to make sure she’s safe, and I didn’t sense any lies when he told me that. I don’t know why, but he’s still here and still protecting us, still holding up a shield around yours over the entire city. This all goes far past the deal that you made with him.”

“I know, and every second that goes past, he could lower that shield, and it would only be our shield that’s left. It’s not meant to be attacked, because it’s only meant to hide us. It won’t take Erin long to bring it down.”

Breelyn growls, the sound echoing. “She is dead when I get my claws on her.”

Part of me feels sad at that thought, but if she lowers the shield, placing a death sentence on my pack, then she will die.

Phim comes into the room last, the doors clicking shut behind her. She holds Serendipity in her arms, my toddler sleeping on her shoulder, hidden by a white blanket. “Didn’t want to miss the fun.”

I smile at my sister, glad to have her here, and she sits down on one of the seats. Phim being present isn’t just to be here for me, it’s making a point about Serendipity and the place she has in this pack: she isn’t a secret and I want them all to know about her. It was the alphas’ idea, and from the ripple of whispers in the room, it’s had the effect we wanted.

Let the pack know about her.

And how she is staying here.

My daughter.

“Ours,” Valentine hums into my mind. “Now come and sit with us. Your place is at our side, Mai.”

My heart swells as I force my legs to move up to the stairs at the side of the platform and walk past the marble pillars to the next floor. Several of the plaza leaders bow their heads, others watch me with uncertainty, and I try and fail to remember all their names until I come to one I do know.

Solandis Fall. She stands from her seat and bows low. “I am very glad to have you as our alpha female, Mairin Fall. Even if you stopped all of our hearts with your dramatic return to the city.”

My lips twitch. “I felt like learning to fly... Turns out it’s not one of my skills.”

She deeply chuckles, and I incline my head at her before walking away. The tension seems to have eased from the room a little as I move to the empty seat, Alpha Reine’s old seat, and sit down on the cold stone. My alphas are on either side of me, and I count the wolves in the room. Seven plaza leaders, not including my alphas or me.

Phim and Breelyn, possibly Solandis, are on my side. Only the rest of them to go. No pressure.

“Where should we begin?” Silas starts, his deep voice cutting into the silence and his hand coming to rest on my knee.

Henderson lifts a large map in front of him and spreads it out. “May I?”

Silas nods, and no one else says a word as Henderson speaks. “We’ve gone over our numbers and done a rough judgment of the numbers that are outside our city in the angel army. I’m going to be frank; we are severely outnumbered.”

The whispers start up again, and Henderson clears his throat. “Thanks to our beautiful alpha female, we know we have two angel armies coming, and even with them, it will be tight.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” one male states, an older male with greying hair and wickedly dark eyes.

“Carry on, Oliver,” Ragnar says.

Oliver nods. “You mean to tell us we have to accept angel armies into our pack to fight other angels, and we might not even win?”

“I have more news to add, if I can, alphas?” Solandis says, standing. I nod to her, and she continues, “I’ve had wolves

watching outside the city from the towers on the edges of our plaza that give the best view. We have a massive issue that must be discussed. It seems that the Levi are gathering outside in mass numbers, in formations, and they stand still. It's almost like they are puppets on a string, waiting to be unleashed."

"How many?" Silas tightly asks.

"Hundreds of thousands. Maybe even more," she breathes out, and the stark fear in her voice shakes us all to our cores.

I lean back in my seat. The first thought coming to my mind is Adira and how she controlled some Levi like puppets before. But she could never control a massive army like that, and there was no way she left The Rite Forest.

No, this is Erin or Cenwyn...and we need to figure out how to stop them. Solandis carries on. "The angels must be controlling them somehow, and their numbers added to the numbers of angels outside means our city will be swarmed in moments."

"How is it possible?" I mutter. "I never heard anything about Levi when I was with the king."

"Dark magic," Valentine gravely states. "Dangerous, far more than the Levi are."

"Thank you, Solandis," Ragnar tells her, and she sits down.

Silas stands and places his hands on the small pillar top in front of us. "I was made to study every war—human, shifter, and even the gods' wars—as a child. We each were, and I can tell you now that wars are not always won with numbers. Strategy can be as dangerous as an army. They are angels, and yes, they may be able to fly, but at the end of the day, we have a weapon that can stop them: our venom. It is poisonous to them, and I suggest we start making weapons that will make the most of that fact."

"How poisonous is a bite?" I question.

"One drop in their bloodstream will kill them on the spot." Silas gives me a mischievously dark smile. "And angels aren't

the only things that fly. Arrows do the same, and we have a very, very well-trained arsenal of wolves who could shoot a feather in a snowstorm.”

“We will have as many wolves as we can possibly find to extract their venom for the weapons,” Oliver states rather proudly.

“All the weapons, including the ones in this castle, must be spread out through the pack, and make sure everyone knows to cover them in venom. It won’t hurt wolves,” Henderson states.

The doors creak open, and we go silent. My alphas all have the same emotion. They are happy about whoever is coming in. Valentine clears his throat. “We also have something else to bring up today.”

“You can tell us off later for not telling you about this. We thought it might be a nice surprise,” Ragnar whispers into my mind.

“Depends on your idea of surprise,” I say back, but truthfully, I’m curious.

Callahan strolls in, his boots stomping on the floor, and my heart seems to burst with happiness to see him healed and walking straight towards us as the doors click shut behind him.

Breelyn seems to go completely still and wide eyed as she watches him pass her and come to a stop. He’s wearing all his leathers again, but they have changed, and now the Fall Mountain Pack symbol is on his breastplate. His hair is brushed to the side, not a speck of blood on him, and his cheeks are full of colour, his wings healed and imposing behind him.

Callahan kneels before the alphas, before us all, as all my alphas stand up. Henderson looks down at him. “There is a position of beta open in our pack, and there is no one in this entire world who deserves that position more than Callahan Fall. He is one of us, and he is our new beta wolf.”

I’m shocked silent, but the plaza leaders are not. They buzz with the news before Oliver speaks. “But he’s an angel and—”

“And what?” Silas growls. Oliver immediately bows his head. “He’s an angel who risked his life to save our alpha female, risked his life to save all of us many times over. He’s a good male. He’s strong and fierce. He’s honourable, and I cannot see another reason why he should not be our beta when he is a very trusted member of our pack. The mark has been given, as it has to Breelyn and Seraphim before him, and it was accepted. He is the first angel to be a beta in the Fall Mountain Pack.”

“Many years ago, the alphas of Fall Mountain had a beta who was human. They called him a knight,” Solandis adds. “Nothing has changed for us in a long time, and we have become clouded from the outside world. I trust my alphas, and I welcome you, Callahan.”

He nods to her, and I give her a small smile as I stand up. Everyone looks at me, and I look down at Callahan. He saved my life, and I’d do anything to save him. He is one of my closest friends, and I think the alphas have made the right decision. “He may be an angel, but times are changing. We’re going to rely on angels to save us in this war, and there is no one who will honour this position more than Callahan.”

“Now sit down,” Valentine tells the others. “And rise, Beta Callahan.”

“Yes, alphas,” Callahan says, rising to his feet and crossing his large arms. He looks down at Breelyn, like he is addicted to seeing her in every room they are in, and they share a private look between them.

I hope they end up together, even if it’s a tough journey for them both.

Henderson stands as I sit. “Beta Callahan has offered up some very useful insights into Cenwyn’s armies, the attacks they will use and how we can best destroy them before they see it coming.”

“How could he possibly know that?” Oliver questions.

“I used to be a commander of one of the angel courts, and part of my command was to travel to other courts and help

them train. I made many friends in these courts and taught countless males to fight. I can teach you how to spot their weaknesses and beat them.”

“We are going to strategise to use our own attacks,” Silas says, and then they all start discussing in detail how they are going to do just that. Oliver and the others seem to listen to Callahan, mostly out of an interest in everything he explains to them. The meeting goes on for a long time as they talk about everything that needs to be done. So much talk, it makes my head hurt, and I was confused and lost in the conversation after only half an hour. After a while, my bones ache as I sit in the cold chair that could really use a cushion as the meeting goes on for hours. My stomach growls, and I look at the empty seat where Phim was but left two hours ago when Serendipity woke up.

The only part I feel like I can add to is the agreement about where everyone’s going to be hidden. The children and wolves that cannot fight are going to be brought to the castle, and the rest into the middle of the city where we can protect them. There are many old temples and woodland to hide within. We’ve come to the agreement to stock supplies for a few weeks for the children and leave a few hundred guards to protect them. I’ve already decided I’m going to ask Phim to lead the wolves protecting the castle, Serendipity, Trey and Jesper who will be in here.

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I am hungry. Can we take a break for some lunch?” Solandis asks us.

My stomach rumbles in agreement. Oliver clears his throat. “We have one last topic to discuss before we can go on our ways for today and meet tomorrow. The Ravensword Pack wolves.”

My stomach drops. “They’re currently being held in a block of houses right outside the castle. Those houses will need to be used for the vulnerable, as well as tents being set up around it, and we need to know if any of them are going to fight with us or hide.”

“Many are females and children,” Breelyn adds in, her voice protective. “Tortured females and scared children.”

I know she has been to see them a few times and made sure they have been looked after well.

“Not all of them. They have a near thousand males who could fight,” Oliver smoothly responds, a planned response.

“Omega Breelyn, Omega Seraphim, and I will talk to them,” I say. “We all know the Ravensword wolves, and if anyone is going to get them on our side, it is us.”

“I’m sure the males will fight for their females and children,” Ragnar suggests.

I hope so.

“We all have a lot of work to do, and this meeting is over for now. Have a good night, and may the gods be with you all,” Henderson states. The chairs groan as all the plaza leaders stand. Callahan and Breelyn lead out the crowd, and all the alphas except Henderson go with them, kissing me on the cheek before they leave. I know they would stay if they could, but I only have to glimpse into their minds to see all the tasks that need to be done before they can rest. I want to help with them, but I wouldn’t know where to start. I will make sure to have food sent to them at least.

I help Henderson fold up the maps on the pillar desk in front of him as the doors shut, leaving us alone.

“I’m proud of you, Mai,” Henderson says, folding a map. “It’s like you’ve been alpha female for years.”

“You guys aren’t doing a bad job either,” I tell him. “Aunt Reine and Uncle Soren would be proud.”

Henderson looks down, and I step closer, brushing my body against his. I run my hands up his thick arms to his shoulders and lean up, kissing his cheek, wishing I could take away the sadness I feel through our bond. “We’re going to get through this. I know we can.”

He looks me dead in the eyes, his gaze taking my breath away. He is so beautiful for a male, so perfect, and sometimes

I wonder how I ever deserve him. How the world does.

He runs his finger down my cheek. “Stop looking at me like that. Your scent is addictive, and your thoughts are worse.”

My lips twitch, even as my body comes alive. He growls and nuzzles his head into my neck, kissing my skin softly. “As much as I’d love to put you on this desk, rip those leathers off and fuck you for hours until we both are delicious with pleasure, I can’t. There’s a lot to be done with this damn war coming up, and I need you to walk away before I say fuck it and do every dirty thing I’m thinking of with you.”

My cheeks burn, and I can’t think straight. I certainly do not want to move...and I’m curious what Henderson would be like when he lost control completely, when he does all the dirty things he just told me about. Every part of my body tightens with the thought. He groans, reading my thoughts. “Mai.”

I gulp at the lust in his eyes as he watches me step away. His wolf flashes in his eyes, and I know he is fighting the urge to chase me.

I peel off my shirt, leaving my heavy breasts to fall, and he looks right at them. My heart pounds as I slowly tug down my trousers, kicking off my boots and standing bare in front of my alpha.

He growls and then snaps.

One minute I’m standing, the next I’m on the table, and he is kissing me deeply as he slides his fingers inside me seconds later. I moan into his mouth, and he growls. “So wet for me already.”

He rubs my clit, sending shockwaves of pleasure through me as I fumble with his belt. I love Henderson when he loses control. I hear his zipper go down right before he pulls my legs apart and easily thrusts into me. I clench around him as he grabs my ass and fucks me hard. His hard cock hits the right spot as I match his movement, both of us lost in the pleasure

as he groans into my mouth. He reaches between us, rubbing my clit at the same time he bites down on my shoulder.

I cry out his name, my shout echoing around the court meeting room as I come hard. The mix of pain and pleasure is flawless, and Henderson thickens as he comes, stretching me and filling me with his come. I breathlessly gasp as he kisses my neck softly and coughs out a laugh.

“You’re a naughty female, Mai,” he tells me.

I grin at him as he pulls out of me. “I know. Only when it comes to you and my personal mission of making you lose control more often.”

He only darkly chuckles, his cheeks burning red as he gets me a cloth and helps me clean up before dressing. I wrap my arms around him and cuddle him for a second. “I’m going to look at the book and order you all food before we both lose control again.”

His resounding growl sends shivers down my spine. “I’m coming for you when I’m done here.”

“Good,” I say, heading towards the door. I look over my shoulder at my alpha and the heat in his eyes. “I won’t run, and I will be naked when you do.”

His groan stays with me as I leave the room and try to ignore the guards outside who follow after me. After finding the cooks and ordering food for the alphas, sweet treats for Jesper, Trey and Serendipity, I go back to my bedroom and pull the book out from the side of my bed unit. I nibble on a turkey and stuffing sandwich as I start flicking through the empty pages. When my sandwich is gone, I feel nothing but annoyed at the empty book.

Why would the library give me this, right after Dot’s death, if it didn’t mean something? If it wasn’t useful?

The blank pages before me glow green, brightly beaming light into the room, and I have to cover my eyes before it starts to fade. I look down, surprised to see green vines crawling over the page, shaping themselves into words written in thorns and leaves. The words twist and spiral until they make a long

paragraph for me to read, in an old language I shouldn't know. But I do.

Or Persephone does, and somehow, I read it too. The book explains that the seven are the purest and strongest magic in the world, purer than the gods because they are souls of pure magic, made into mortal weapons.

“Morganis was made as a shield around the city Hades had made, using the mortal weapon to protect his home. He wished for more weapons for the spell he made, but he only had the one.”

It goes on and on about the details of making the shield, how Hades made it in the first place, and how the water in the waterfall is connected all the way to hell.

How does this help me?

The book flicks its pages over, and on another plain page, a spell appears, along with instructions on how to cast it. Everything from dropping the blood of a god or goddess on the weapon and the exact words to cast the shield.

“You want me to make a new shield? Or I suppose, strengthen the one that exists?”

Of course, the book doesn't answer me, but I get a good feeling that I'm right.

I lean back on my bed, looking at the book and then to Morganis on my hip, Chaitala on the wall opposite me, and Iris on my finger. I have three of the seven, and I should be able to make a gigantic shield. I barely believe it as I look back down at the book. I don't want to trust it for a second, but something deep down inside me knows that this is the right thing to do. I search for the alphas, wanting to tell them about this and deciding we can make this decision together.

“We are coming, mate,” Valentine whispers down the bond, and I smile. We do this together or not at all...and if it works, it might buy our pack the time we need to save us all.

Four

ℒ

RAGNAR FALL

FOLLOWING the pull towards my mate, I walk down the dim corridors of my home, feeling the shadows spreading around me, reacting to the dark magic in the core of my soul. It's hard to avoid the shadows, the magic that comes with it, and the reminder of Hades, the presence I always feel connected to me. I am Hades. We are Hades. Yet even gods can't always manage to save the ones they love, and every single day feels like another moment leading up to a war where I could lose her.

Mai.

My mate's name is like a prayer as I whisper it to the shadows, to Hades, who is always listening in. He wants to protect her too, but not Mai...more Persephone. I believe he loves her blindly and deeply, and they were together for centuries. I want to say I can understand that love, but I see all the perfect and imperfect things in my mate, and I'd never, ever let her destroy herself in the way Persephone clearly has.

She took control of my mate.

A low growl echoes out of my chest, and the guards outside the corridor leading away from my mother's room blanch in fear. When they see it wasn't directed at them, they hold their heads higher. I glance back at the door to my mother's room and think about her lying there, so pale and lifeless. I've always seen my mother as a fierce alpha female, strong and ready to battle any opponent. But now...she is broken, and I don't know how I could possibly fix her. I don't blame her for not waking up, because if something happened to Mai, I'd simply stop existing too. Part of me wishes she would wake up now, however selfish it may be for me to want her to wake up to help us save our pack. She could help me deal with the stubborn and stuck-in-their-ways plaza leaders, the never-ending list of problems, the last-minute mating

ceremonies that need to be approved by an alpha, and the list that never seems to stop. I know it's not always going to be like this, and my brothers are each taking their part of the responsibility, but we all feel like we have been given keys to a car when none of us can drive.

I miss tinkering in the garage, fixing things...and I barely remember a time when I had free time to do things like that. I wouldn't change things, not when they led me back to Mai and back home to our pack, but it's another tiny thing I will fight to have once again.

Mai.

I smile as I think of her, my length hardening in my trousers at the mere thought. Now that I remember who she is, I can't get enough, and I always, always need to be around her. The protective and possessive urges are sated when we are close, but the war coming up is making my wolf feel threatened. The memories are all fleeting, but they are all bits of a long story that I now pretty much know everything about. My mind feels like it's unlocked. I turn around a corner, the castle whispering in the wind, and I nearly bump straight into Phim, her hand tightly wrapped around the little girl's hand at her side. Five guards follow them, and they all bow, and Phim only cockily smiles at me.

"Alpha," she says. "What you up to?"

I smile at Serendipity, who shyly hides behind Phim. "Going to see my mate, what else?"

She peeps out from behind Phim, and the resemblance to her mother—my mate—is astonishing. She looks just like Mai did as a child, but there are some things about her that clearly come from her bastard of a father. This little girl, who is shy but bossy, makes me kneel down so we are on the same level.

The wolves guarding look shocked, but I don't care what they think.

This is my mate's daughter.

I will treat her as my own.

“Do you remember me? We travelled with Niall here together,” I question, offering her my hand. She looks at my hand and back up to Phim, who nods.

“This is your alpha and your mum’s mate,” Phim says, like she is reminding her and has told her before. She knows who I am and spent weeks asking me many questions about the pack that I didn’t have the answers to. I do now.

“Mairin,” she corrects Phim, with a sweet voice that seems so much older than she is. “I remember you.”

“Hello, Dip. How are you settling into the castle?” I ask.

She steps closer but doesn’t take my hand. I do notice she has a piece of folded paper in her hand. Her eyes, so much like her mother’s, flash like a green forest on fire. “I like it and my Auntie Seraphim.”

Phim cringes at the auntie title, and I smirk, remembering that for teasing her later on. “Good. What’s that you’ve got?”

Dip holds up a little painting for me after unfolding it. It’s good, for a toddler, and I’m pretty sure it’s meant to be fireworks over a sea. “That’s the famous firework show at the Styx Court? I saw it once on my travels. They set off thousands, and it’s beautiful.”

She nods. “You can have this.”

I take it off her and fold it carefully into my pocket. I’m going to treasure it.

Silas’s frustrated voice fills my mind. “Bastard. You got a gift from Dip? I gave her cake and a teddy bear, and she only frowned at me.”

“I gifted her the painting set, so really it’s a sign she liked my gift,” Henderson adds, very pleased with himself.

Mai chuckles down the bond. “So, fess up. Who gifted her the little sword? I thought it was Silas, but clearly not.”

All of us go silent, but it wasn’t me, and that means it must have been one of them. Valentine is unusually quiet.

“I’ll be with you soon, mate,” I tell her.

I feel her smile down the bond as they all leave. I smile at Dip. “Do you like fireworks, then?”

She nods. “The lights are pretty.”

“Just like you, princess,” Phim says, flicking her nose. She pulls a face at Phim, who pulls one right back.

For a second, a new memory flashes back into my mind of fireworks, brilliant and bright, filling up the black star-filled skies above the trees. It was when I was six, nearly seven. I was sitting with Mai at my side, her hand in mine. Even back then, even as a kid, I just wanted to be close to her, touching her all the time. Even just holding hands was enough to set my heart on fire. Enough to make my wolf howl. All I could see was the fireworks going off reflected in her eyes, because I don’t think I ever looked away. I just looked at her, all night, and it was the most beautiful firework show I’ve seen.

The memory flickers away, and I clear my throat before standing up. “We’ll have to have a firework show when things are a bit better. What do you think? They could be in your honour.”

She smiles widely at me. She is such a beautiful little girl, and it makes me paranoid how I’m going to fight off all the males who will one day want to court her.

“We will come up with a plan to scare them and see if they are worthy,” Valentine smoothly adds to my thoughts. I could put up a wall between us so he doesn’t hear them, but after sharing our thoughts for so long, it would be stranger to do that. “And if not, Dip will be well trained in combat by that age, and she can chop them up for us with the weapons I give her and have Silas train her with.”

“I knew the sword was you, Val,” Mai chuckles.

I grin at the conversation, and Phim frowns at me. “I hate the mating talking thing you do. It’s creepy.”

“It’s amazing,” I reply, looking at the dark circles under her eyes. “Do you need a break?”

“No,” she sharply replies. “I’m the best wolf to defend the children, and you know it. Plus, Dip and I have a lot of missed

time to catch up on. It's a great honour...it doesn't mean I don't worry."

I nod, understanding. None of us deserve Phim, and I'm glad I now remember what a great wolf she is. I hope one day she finds that special female to make her happy and help heal the darker parts of her past.

"I have to go to see your mum," I tell Dip.

"Mairin," she corrects me quickly, and I try not to frown at that. She is very confused, and I don't blame her.

I look at Phim. "Mai might have found a way to make a new shield with that book that was given to her in the library."

Her eyes show nothing but relief. "This could be a game changer for us, and it means we don't have to make any more deals with Draycian, who will no doubt end up our enemy when he realises Dip isn't going anywhere."

I agree. This is her home.

Phim looks down at Dip. "Let's go and get some lunch to eat on the balcony. A bit of fresh air and a walk is good for us."

"Stay with the guards at all times, Phim," I warn her, an alpha command to his beta, and I know she is aware of the change. She is always my friend first, but sometimes I need her to be my beta, especially when war is on the brink of our city. "I feel like something is coming, and I want you to be ready."

She nods at me. "Nothing will touch her or Trey or even that weird kid Jesper who my sister seems to adore so much."

She wrinkles her nose, and Dip giggles. The sound is very sweet.

"He's not that weird, just confused and scared," I say, but I'm not sure even I believe it myself. I've only spoken to him twice. By spoken, I mean stand in silence in the same room as I try and fail to start a conversation. I have seen that he just opened up to Mai, and now that we are all aware he is Dip's uncle and last living relative from her biological father's side,

I know we all need to try harder to make him feel welcome and safe here.

She arches a perfect eyebrow. “He’s very weird, but maybe you are right.”

I watch her walk away with Dip, who gives me a tiny wave, and it makes my heart feel warm. The guards follow after them, but we all know that Phim would kill ten times the amount of angels before the guards could even catch up.

I carry on down the bookcase-lined corridor, and on the stairs down to our floor, I catch up with Henderson.

“How are the memories today, brother?” he questions, tugging on his black cloak and clipping it at his neck.

“Fleeting at times. I remember the important parts, but little details pop up and surprise me sometimes,” I reply as we round a corner. “How is the training going?”

“Soren trained them well,” he states, but I get the feeling they aren’t quite as well-trained as he hoped they would be. I can sense his disappointment and fear for their lives. The angels have spent years killing and fighting, and our wolves have spent years locked behind walls, training only with themselves and not anything real.

I’m not surprised when I walk into Mai’s room, Silas and Valentine are already here. I breathe in my mate’s scent. Frost-kissed peaches and wisps of lavender but with our scent lying underneath hers. A reminder to every male that she is our mate.

A possessive thrill spreads through me from her scent alone.

When I see her, my body all but falls. She is so beautiful, so unaware of it, and her bright green eyes, the same colour as the jaded oceans of the Fenrir Court, lock onto mine. She smiles, and it lights up my entire body like a shot of electricity.

Or that one time I electrocuted myself while fixing a shit show of a car.

It hurt, but with Mai, gods, I want to feel it a million times over.

All three of them are looking over the book, and they are frowning. Valentine clears his throat, leaning back. “Why is it blank now? Doesn’t it know we can see your memories and you’ve shown it to us?”

“Maybe it doesn’t like Hades’s magic?” I question. “It could be warded against it, and if this book was from Dot—Demeter—then she would have bound it to not reveal anything when Hades was around. She hated him.”

Mai sighs and shuts the book. “It doesn’t matter. I can remember it. It feels like I know the spell, the old language, and I’m not sure I could forget a word if I tried. It makes me wonder if Persephone wrote this book.”

Silas tucks a stray bit of hair behind her ear. “Can we trust this book?”

I look from the book to the glowing sword, the dagger, and ring. Three of the legendary seven in one room, and a book who thinks they can be used to make a shield around our pack. Hundreds of thousands of lives rely on our decision.

Mai stays silent for a moment, and I feel her emotions slip into a spiral of worry. She is scared that this could be a trick and this whole decision could end our pack.

“We trust you,” I gently say, walking over and placing my hand on her shoulder. She covers my hand with hers, so soft, and a buzz of pleasure bounces down my spine at her nearness. I haven’t had enough of her, and I don’t think I ever will, and every hour has me counting down to when I can be with her again.

“I trust the book,” she says, her voice firm. “We need the help of the gods to save our pack at this point, or they will all die. We don’t have a choice, and I don’t feel like I’m making the wrong choice. This gamble is worth it.”

“Agreed,” Henderson says first. Silas and Valentine nod, and Mai looks up at me. My eyes drop to her pouty lips, so soft and pink like somewhere else. Fuck, focus, Ragnar.

Silas darkly chuckles at the change in my scent, and I pull my finger up at him. “I think we have to do this. I have something else I feel that we all need to talk about urgently and alone.” Any thoughts of stripping Mai bare and hearing her sweet moans as I slip inside her disappear as I begin. “I was going to see Reine when I received some news from our spying guards on the borders. Three armies of angels have joined Cenwyn’s forces outside, and I’m pretty sure Niall is with them, Deimos too.”

“They should be coming into the city soon,” Mai says with a big smile. I know how much her time cost us all, and her, to get those alliances that might just save us from a complete massacre. “We must have the tents set up and supplies ready.”

Valentine nods. “I will order it to begin immediately.”

“How many do you think they’re bringing?” Silas questions. “Callahan told us how well-trained the angels of Fenrir are. A few thousand of them could really help us.”

“Hundreds of thousands,” I say, remembering what the guard said. “They have both brought near enough their entire courts to this fight. I’m sure Cenwyn is thinking how fucking loyal they are.”

Silas wickedly smirks. “Wait until he finds out they are only loyal to our mate.”

“Hopefully, he makes some rash and unplanned decisions that we can use against him,” Henderson suggests.

“We need a better shield. Now,” Mai firmly says, climbing off the bed. She places her hands on her hips, and the bossy alpha female look she gives us all makes my cock hard.

Valentine leans down and kisses her softly. I thought I’d feel jealous of another male kissing my mate, and there are moments it’s hard to make my wolf back down because she’s our mate. But we grew up together, and I trust these males with my life, and with hers. Loving Mai has always been our connection, deeper than Hades and any magic could be.

I love her completely. I’ve willingly let her consume my entire soul without a fight.

It was hers in the first place.

As dark as it may be.

Even when I had no memories, I still remembered that deep down in my soul, she was mine and I was hers. It was the only light that kept my mind from burning in that prison, that creature eating away at the core of my memories. He—I assumed he was male from his deep voice—lived in the embers of the flame, and I never once saw anything but his eyes.

Pure burning fire.

He is a monster that should never, ever be let loose on this world.

Mai is finished sliding on the ring and clipping the dagger before she reaches for the sword. I step closer to the bed and pick it up. “I’m coming with you.”

“It might not work with you close,” she replies, “but I’d love for you to be close by, just in case.”

“We will all—”

“Just Ragnar. The rest of you already have commitments elsewhere to do. Our pack needs you. I can feel and hear their calls,” she says, tapping the side of her head.

Mai picks up the book, and Silas growls at the smug look on my face. “Bastard.”

I grin and he playfully swings for me, which I duck under and head to the door. Mai is laughing at our antics as we leave the room, and I hold Chaitala tightly in my hand. Sometimes I can imagine her speaking to me as she repaired my memories, like her soul is still alive in the metal.

We all stop in the corridor as Silas barks orders at Mai’s guards, and they scatter. She looks between us all. “Thank you, by the way, for making this decision together. I know there’s been things in the past we haven’t done all together, important decisions, and I was wrong not to include you before in things that could alter our lives. This is our pack, our relationship, our mating. I want to come to you first.”

“Mai...,” Henderson softly says her name, like a prayer we have all said more than once in the past as we searched the world for her.

“I know your initial reaction was to say no about the deal, but I still should have come to you. I likely would have gotten my memories back, anyway. So all of it was pointless. Now I have a deal that I can’t take back and it risks my daughter’s life. Sometimes I make rash decisions, but I’m trying to learn that we should make decisions together, and then things won’t be so rash in that sense.”

“Always together, Mai,” I tell her, softly leaning down and kissing her cheek. “We all make mistakes. We are people, after all. Human, wolf, angel, we all fuck up.”

“Now get your ass to the roof and then come back. I want you naked in our bed for tonight,” Silas commands before walking away.

I don’t disagree with that. The thought is hard to erase from my mind as Mai sweetly chuckles and heads away. Henderson and Valentine leave with Silas, and I don’t envy their task of convincing the wolves to get ready to help angels.

We go up the stone staircase with the statues of all the gods. Hades looks strange in stone, handsome for a male god, but Persephone stands out the most. I briefly look at the goddess Peitho. That was Adira’s goddess, the art of persuasion and seduction, but it never worked on us, despite her best attempts. Not for the first time, I find myself wondering what happened to her after everything she did to my mate. After trying to kill her, almost killing her, for that matter. I just want to know she’s dead, or I’m going to find her and finish the job. I barely remember the girl that we grew up with, the one that was always so jealous and petty and wanted everything that she couldn’t have. You can’t force someone to love you, and trying to get us to love her utterly destroyed her. I hate that it almost destroyed Mai as well. I hope she’s dead.

Mai pauses, the light from Morganis like a halo of green in the darkness of the stairs. “She could control the Levi, and we have an army outside of clearly controlled Levi. I can’t

convince myself that it's her, because to do that, she would have to be far more powerful than she ever appeared to be."

I nod. "She wasn't that powerful."

"She seemed to be able to control a few of them at one time, and even then, it seemed a struggle. How could she possibly control an army? Who could?"

"It's not Adira," I say softly and place my hand on her lower back. "I don't know what it is or who. I don't know what the Levi really are, but I do know that we'll figure it out and we're not going to let you get hurt."

She turns and looks up at me, her lips parting. Fuck it. I sink my hand into her soft hair and pull her up to my lips. The soft moan that vibrates out of her throat sets my blood on fire, and I push her against the wall, plastering my body to hers as I part her legs around my hips. I love her every soft moan, the feel of her curves against my body and how fucking sweet she tastes.

"I've missed you," she says between kisses.

I groan as she pulls back, and I nudge her nose with my own. "I've missed you too, sweetheart."

We both hear the noises of guards coming down the steps, and I reluctantly let her go, giving her enough time to look less flustered as the guards come down, pausing to bow, and then walking on. They no doubt scented our lust, and Mai's red cheeks suggest she knows that too. I grin to myself as we carry on up the stairs.

"Tell me your favourite memory of us," Mai asks as we head up the stairs.

"I remember our first kiss, and that will always be my favourite, but there are so many more. I remember wanting you from the second I got my wolf. I remember seeing you in that beach house on that couch after so long. You were—are—so beautiful, but you'd changed from the young girl that we remembered to a woman. A female with such untapped strength and yet feeling so broken."

“I wanted you from the second I saw you at that beach house,” she admits, and I feel some deep-seated pride over that. We step out into the bright light of day, the silence only broken by the wind and howls of wolves in our pack, miles away. “I don’t think I was ever completely lost; I was just looking for you and didn’t know it. It broke me. The rape...the way the pack abused me...well, it took light from my soul. You four blasted light right back, brighter than ever, and I will forever love you for that.”

I curl my hand around her waist. “Your soul was already the brightest star in the world, Mai. I think we were just the darkness you needed to shine.”

She pauses to look up at me, the wind blowing her hair around her shoulders. Her eyes light up and glitteringly shine as she kisses me softly.

The kiss doesn’t stay soft, soon deepening as our need for each other takes over. I push away this time, her wolf growling in protest. “If we keep doing this, I’ll be stripping you down on that rooftop and letting the entire pack know what we’re doing.”

Her cheeks flush, and I notice right away she doesn’t say no to that idea. I like the idea of everyone knowing she is mine, but I also don’t like the idea of anyone but us hearing her moans, seeing her pleasure. We head up to the roof, and I try not to stare at her perfect ass in the leather clothes the entire way up, but I fail. She sets out the book on the ground, and I leave Chaitala with her before going to the other side of the roof, as far away as I’m willing to go from her while she does this.

She opens the book, and I feel her happiness that the spell is back before she places Chaitala next to Morganis and Iris.

Mai walks over to me, stopping in front of me. “The spell needs blood. I don’t want to cut my palm with Morganis in case it messes with the magic.”

I nod and she reaches to the side of my belt, her soft hand skimming across my cock purposely. The teasing madam.

“You’re going to pay for that one later, sweetheart,” I whisper in her ear as she takes my dagger out of my belt.

She winks at me before walking away, and I groan.

I’m dying for her.

I flinch as she cuts her hand, feeling her pain through the bond, but she only lets out a tiny whimper as she holds her hand over each of the three of the seven weapons that we have. I wonder how strong a shield would be if we had all seven.

Mai looks up at me, like she needs my strength—and I’d happily give her everything I’ve got—before she starts talking. Chanting. There isn’t a word I understand as she reads the spell in the book, and it feels like I shouldn’t ever hear it. That no one should. I almost feel Hades cowering away from us with every word.

I carefully pull red shadows around myself just in case, ready to snap and reach for Mai at a moment’s notice, even if my power does shy away from her in this moment with the magic she is calling. Her body starts to glow green in a way I’ve seen it do before when she is using her powers.

This isn’t her power.

“Mai!” I shout into her mind, but something blocks me out, shoving me out. She floats into the air from the power, the book and weapons lost but still connected to her magic in streams of energy that whip around her like vines, lashing out at everything nearby. The walls of the roof crumble as I walk right for her, using my own power to knock away the energy that hits out at me.

“Get to her!” Silas roars in my mind.

“I’m fucking trying!” I shout back to him in my mind. A blast of green energy slams right into me, and I fly backwards, rolling myself to a stop. I stand up and try again as the surrounding magic seems to build.

I don’t exactly feel anything wrong with her. She’s calm, but I hate I can’t get to her mind or body.

She looks like a goddess, and I know anyone who looks upon her now would never guess she is a shifter.

The green light floats around her in her leathers, making every curve, every dip of her body stand out. Her long blonde hair flows around her in the wind, and her face is so beautiful as she looks up with her forest green eyes open, glowing like the sun.

Her eyes have always reminded me of the dark green leaves of a forest, the vibrant colour they are before autumn comes and turns them. At this moment, her eyes remind me of the fresh grass of spring.

She swings her arms out, and a blast of green magic spreads out from around her body. It sends me flying straight off the roof, and I barely have time to shift into my wolf before I land in a pile of rubble, groaning in pain. I send a burst of magic around my wolf, pushing the rocks and brick off me in an explosion before I stand, limping on my right leg that feels broken.

The panic lacing through my chest simply erases the pain as I look up, seeing a green shield shining high in the air above the city.

It worked.

“Mai?” I shout, my brothers silent as much as she is, but I can feel them getting closer. The pack is filled with screams of panic and wonder from those who saw Mai make the shield. If they didn’t worship her for winning the rite, being a spy for them, surviving a fall into the city from miles above, this will do it.

I rush up the steps as fast as I can with my leg injured, and get up them in seconds. I barely hit the roof before she falls out of the air, her small body shifting mid-air until her beautiful wolf collapses onto the ground, completely knocked out. I was seconds away, and I couldn’t stop that blow. Fuck.

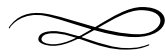
My wolf nearly collapses in relief, sensing her breathing before we run our eyes over her entire body. Her coat is beautiful as she is, so unique and Mai-like. There are now

symbols on her fur that are markers of her title, just like the symbols under our fur that no one can see except for her. Even then, she'd have to look closely. I nudge her beautifully white and startlingly black coat to move her off the bricks under her and onto smoother stone before I lie down next to my mate.

I'll wait forever for her to wake, and kiss her a million times until she never scares me again.

Knowing my Mai, there will be several thousands of millions of kisses in our future.

Five



WISPS OF WIND *blow around me, pushing my hair away from my face, and I pull strands that latch onto the side of my nose away. I look around me at the beautiful grass field, the smell of fresh spring filling my nose. The grass itself is a vibrant green, tickling my ankles as I walk between the soft blades and enjoy the warmth of the air. There are no flowers, but it feels like there should be in a place like this, the endless empty grass field. Birds fly above my head, and I look up at them, a small blue breed of bird I don't know, and above them is a calm beautiful blue sky.*

I hear a soft feminine laugh. I'm not alone. I spin around to where the voice came from to see Hades and Persephone lying in the grass a few feet away, and I must be invisible to them. This is another dream, another one of her dreams. I wonder what she wants me to know...because I feel like she is sending me these dreams. Hades points up at a single star out in the sky. That shouldn't be there because it's not night. Yet the star, bright and yellow, is shining.

"Zeus said that he's going to name all the stars in the sky after his lovers," Hades murmurs, his voice amused.

Persephone laughs, sounding so young and free. "Well, he would need millions of stars, and not even your brother is that powerful."

He looks down at her, smiling at her sweet laugh. "I wish I could protect you from them all."

“I know this,” she whispers. “We will protect each other from whatever comes.”

Hades looks up at the star. “Apparently, Zeus found something from the Wolven gods. Something that’s powerful that links our spirits to mortals. It could keep us immortal forever, without relying on the Wolven gods. We would be our own gods.”

“You say it like you want this?” she quietly questions. “Not even gods deserve to live forever without a price. Our price isn’t so bad...we just have to keep the world ticking along. I control the fertility of the mortals, and you control hell. Everything works. Why change this?”

“Because I can’t lose you,” he firmly replies. “And the Wolven gods own us. We will never be free, and they could take you from me at any time.”

She cups his cheek. “But they have not yet. We will live long lives without risking this.”

Hades leans into her touch. “We must be free of them. Do this for me, Persephone?”

My eyes widen at the new information about everything I’m slowly learning. The Wolven gods made the gods we know and owned them, providing the magic they gave, the long lives...and the gods clearly found a way to be free.

But at what cost?

“Is that why Zeus has invited us all to that ball at his fancy palace?” she questions. “I don’t think many of the gods will go. No one trusts him.”

“He is my brother, and I believe he truly wants what is best for us,” he replies. She looks at him with hesitation for a moment before she nods. He kisses her. “You make me so happy.”

“What’s this magic called?” she questions.

He runs his fingers down her bare arm. “Zeus claimed it’s an apple. An Apple of Discord, he has named it.”

That's what Zeus did with the apple, and then he gave it to Persephone, likely because he was in love with her and wanted her for his own. Everything is slowly clicking into place. They start to kiss, and I look away. This dream is just a forewarning for them because, in the end, it ruined everything they had. He lost Persephone anyway.

I wake up slowly, blinking my eyes at the sunlight beaming through the room in vivid shades of orange, yellow, and pinks. I soon realise the sun is setting and I've been asleep a lot longer than I thought I had. I sit up and look over to see Valentine pacing by the door. His eyes widen when he sees me, and he comes to my side, sitting on the bed. Without saying a word, he shows me everything that happened from Ragnar's perspective, and I flinch.

"Is Ragnar okay?" I ask. "Did the shield work?"

I don't know why I asked the second question when I can feel the magic working, an extension of our alpha bonds to the pack. It's like a ribbon tied around the life strings attaching us all together.

"He is fine, and yes, it has worked," he soothes me, picking up my hand. "You scared the shit out of us all, Mai. What happened?"

"I don't remember," I admit. "I remember starting to read the spell, and everything is black after that until I was dreaming and then here."

"You can tell me about the dream in a moment," he says. I look at him completely this time, my dream like fog disappearing as everything becomes clearer. Valentine is geared up like he's ready for war.

"Is everything okay?" I question, already reaching for my mating bond to find out where the others are. Something's very wrong. The pack is panicked, so many of them worried and frightened, and my alphas are using a hell of a lot of magic for some reason. I search my bond for Phim and sense she is with the children, and they are safe.

Valentine barely gets to say a word before I climb out of bed. “Wait, Mai, you should rest.”

“I should be fighting at their side with you,” I correct him. “I will never be the alpha female who lies in bed while her pack is in danger. You know this.”

He searches my eyes. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“Yes, I am,” I firmly tell him, meaning every word. He nods and I start getting changed immediately into my leathers.

“What is going on?” I ask as I pull my shirt on and then my trousers.

“It’s probably best to just show you,” he suggests, walking over. He waits until my trousers are on before a series of images flash into my mind. I’m suddenly standing on the edge of the city, on a rooftop, watching outside the city as hundreds of thousands of angels are being slaughtered by other angels and Levi. They are completely surrounded, boxed in, and they are grounded thanks to a shield of black-tinged-blue magic buzzing in the air. My alphas have already sent out thousands of our wolves to hold the line with the angels, making a good defence and more wolves are on the way. I look to the right, a good mile outside of the city barrier, where a group of angels block out someone in the middle who is clearly making the blue magic barrier.

Erin.

I grit my teeth in anger, wishing I’d stopped her sooner. It’s a massacre, and they won’t last long without getting into the city. I briefly recognise the symbols on their armour. It’s both the Fenrir and Styx armies. They came, and I promised them safety.

The images flash away. “Is that what is currently happening? Why can’t they get in? Where is Cenwyn, and why hasn’t he sent his entire army to stop them?”

“Yes, that is now, and my brothers are holding part of the shield open with their power. The shield is too strong and clearly is made for wolves. It won’t let the angels in, and we don’t know why. The alphas are being drained by the second,

but some angels are getting through. Not enough though,” Valentine explains to me. “Deimos was smart and sent a portion of his army to the other side, as sacrifices to make it look like only they aren’t betraying the king. Cenwyn sent everyone there, and when the king’s army wasn’t looking, Deimos’s angels tried to get in. No one was expecting the shield to refuse them, and we don’t have a lot of time before Cenwyn will be on us. I’d give it half an hour before he notices.”

That’s what I’m feeling from my alphas. “The pack is gathering, and we’re going to go out and fight for the angels. We sent out everyone near to help.”

My gut churns at the deaths of the angels who are sacrifices. I can’t imagine the ending they will be getting as we speak.

I know they’d never leave allies out there, but they need me.

“I’m connected to the shield, and I might be able to open it more than they can. Then you can fight, and I can deal with Erin,” I say, making a plan.

“Together,” Valentine agrees, but he can’t hide the slight possessive worry that I feel from him. I clip Morganis to my hip, sliding on the ring, and pass Chaitala to Valentine, the yellow shine reflecting in his eyes.

“There are angels waiting outside for us,” Valentine says, taking my hand. We head out together, and I smile at Arinya and Alisander. They are flawlessly beautiful, even dressed in black leathers and their hair smoothed back away from their faces.

“I haven’t seen you both yet to say thank you for saving Callahan and me,” I say as way of introduction.

They both bow. “It was a great honour to be able to save you both.”

“No need for bowing,” I say and look at Valentine before turning back to them. “They’re going to fly us over?”

“We are,” Alisander says, and my stomach drops. I know we need to get there quickly, but I can’t help the trickle of fear that snakes down my spine at the idea of flying.

Valentine kisses me gently, reading my thoughts. “They won’t let you fall, and if they did, I’d rip their spines out.”

The angels go silent, and I whack his arm. “The alpha is joking.”

Valentine says nothing, and the angels don’t look convinced. I clear my throat. “Let’s go to the other alphas, please.”

I step towards Arinya, who hooks her arms under my shoulders and then jumps with me into the air, straight back into our bedroom. We fly right out of the window, right above the waterfall, and my stomach drops at the sight of the pitch darkness below. Arinya effortlessly flies higher, straight out of the pit and across the pack, over the houses and plazas, the temples and forests, to the right edge of the city. As night starts to fall upon the city, the last bits of light fading, the screams and pain of the angels reach my ears and cut through my heart. I can barely see through the night, through the wind in my eyes as we land on top of a rooftop. My alphas are nothing but shadows, their arms outstretched and red shadows pouring from their fingertips in a line right to the shield, holding open a door-sized gap.

“Mai,” I hear Silas say, his voice strained.

“I’ve got this,” I say to them in my mind and walk to their side, watching Valentine join the alphas and add his power. I spot Callahan leading a big group of wolves towards the gap in the wall, and I reach for him in our bond.

“Wait,” I command. “Give me five minutes.”

I can feel the alphas looking at me as Callahan comes to a stop. I blow out a breath and look at Arinya and Alisander. “Go to Callahan and be ready.”

They both nod before flying off, and I look at the shield as I call up my own power. I made this shield, and it will bend to my will.

It must.

My alphas are struggling, and the angels are dying.

I lash out with my power, holding out my hands, and it travels past the alphas' line of shadows and straight into the gap they've already done. I feel the second my power hits the shield, and it fights back, smacking into my chest, and I gasp in pain. I don't let it go, holding onto the power, and it spreads like wildfire across the shield. Something painful jolts through my mind, and I grit my teeth, a small whimper leaving my lips as I push Persephone away and focus on the shield. She had to test the boundaries of the alphas' magic right now.

A bigger gap spreads across the shield, at least five doors long, and the angels start flooding in. Callahan doesn't wait for my command before he is running through the gap with an army of wolves, their teeth bared as they let angels into the city. The shield makes a shimmering see-through wall in the gap, and angels run through it. I watch as one angel flies in from above, and he screams as he is burnt into green dust.

I smile. No one gets in this city if they aren't on our side. I continue to make the gap bigger, until it stretches for at least a mile, and the angels flood in, injured and dying. Wolves run out of the houses to them, helping and calling for healers.

"I've never been as proud of my wolves as I am now," Ragnar says, coming to my side. I look up at him and my alphas as they surround me.

"We will be back soon," Silas says and looks at Valentine. "Take her to that witch. Let her see who our alpha female is."

Warm pride fills my chest. Ragnar and Henderson look at me before shifting with Silas, leaving three black alpha wolves on the roof. They run and jump off the edge, making my heart pound as I watch them land in a blast of red shadows. The red shadows spread around them as they run for the gap, and angels fall out of their way.

I look up at Valentine and take his hand. "Let's go."

I know the quicker we deal with Erin and remove that barrier she has up, the easier it will be for the army to flood

into the city and for the alphas and our wolves to finish off the angels and Levi before coming home. We have to win this fight, or the war might as well be over already.

We run through the empty house and straight out into the streets. I pull out Morganis as we pass dozens of angels and wolves flooding the streets of the houses. I run down the barrier, getting closer to where I can see Erin on the other side, about a mile away.

“I can make a small gap for us to get through. They are all watching the alphas and the bigger gap in the shield. We’d come out behind them, and they won’t see us until it’s too late,” I suggest to Valentine.

Valentine looks between me and Erin. “Are you sure you can handle her?”

I glance at the witch goddess. “Yes, but I don’t want her dead.”

I have to give her a chance because she has been controlled her whole life, and I really don’t believe she is completely evil. I can barely take in the sights and sounds, the blood pouring across the ground, dripping down the rocks like water, and the pain-filled screams. The pure terror that’s in the air makes my heart pound faster with every passing second.

“I’m going to shift so we can move fast. Take Chaitala.”

I do as he asks and take the sword, clipping it onto my belt.

Valentine shifts, and I climb onto his back, digging my hands into his midnight black fur. Without pause, I hold my hand out in front of me and send out my green power to make a very small hole in the barrier, the shield letting me for a moment. It’s just big enough for Valentine to jump through before it snaps shut behind us.

We land outside the city, and I look over to see my alphas, noticing more than black shadows as they rip through the angels and Levi, occasionally letting their red magic spark in the air. Valentine easily jumps up the several rocky edges until we get to the flat land, and we run closer to Erin. She’s got a circle of at least twenty angels, maybe more, in the air and on

the surrounding ground. I spot Benjamin at her side and realise we might need to take him, too. I lean down to Valentine's ear. "You take the ones on the ground, and I'll take the ones in the air. Try not to kill the one standing next to Erin."

His responding growl sends shivers through me. Erin is so focused on using her power to hold the barrier up she doesn't look our way, but the angels definitely see us. They run at us with their swords held high, and at least ten Levi run out of the darkness to join them as they head right for us. The Levi's eyes glow blue in a familiar way that nearly makes me pause as I know exactly who that is, or I suspect so. I just don't know how it's possible. I shake off the thought for a second and focus on the angels in the air, heading right for us. I build up my power as we get closer, letting it spiral in a well inside my soul, an unknown bomb about to go off. I jump off Valentine and roll to a stop when we are close. The angels, who were running for us, start to turn around as Valentine jumps right into one of them and rips his head off his shoulders in one move. My stomach turns, but I don't have time to think about it as the angels in the air direct their gaze our way.

Valentine's wolf sends out a blast of red magic that sends some angels crumbling to the floor, and the rest on the ground are left with nothing but his teeth. As their heads are ripped off, their wings clawed to death as they try to fly, I look up at the angels in the air, how close they are.

I put my hands into the air and, using all my power I've built up, I send a flash of green energy straight into them. It knocks them out of the way, and they scream as my magic cuts through their wings, burning them into nothing and sending them crying in pain as they crash to the ground. My wolf growls in my chest as I lock eyes on Benjamin, who looks between Erin and me. Valentine clears the path for me as I walk right to them, and Benjamin finally touches Erin's shoulder, forcing her to look at me. The barrier drops as her eyes widen in shock, the shock soon slipping into anger.

Sweat pours down her forehead, and I smile when I get closer and stop. "Hello, old friend and her lover."

“Leave, Benjamin,” she commands him. He doesn’t move.

“You best do as she asks. This isn’t going to end nicely,” I warn him, the only warning I will give before I attack. I throw a sphere of my magic straight at her, more a warning than anything. She jumps to the side, away from Benjamin, and sneers at me, a low growl escaping her throat.

I step forward, the power of my alpha female wolf flowing through me. “You should submit.”

“I’m not one of your wolves!” she shouts, pushing off my influence. She crawls to her feet, but I can tell it’s hard for her. Her eyes narrow on me. “You’re going to regret that. You’re not my alpha female and I don’t bow to anyone.”

I don’t see what she is going to do until a blast of magic slams out of her, a build-up of it, and lashes right at me. I protect myself with my power, and it explodes around me. I fly back in the air, landing in a haze of dust as I hear my ribs crack.

Ignoring the intense pain, I stand up and hear a heart-shattering scream.

As the dust settles, I find Erin on her knees, clutching at Benjamin, who isn’t moving, and sobbing his name over and over. His body crackles with blue and green magic, his neck bent to the side at an unnatural angle. Erin keeps screaming his name, and my heart hurts as I look for Valentine. He stands, protected by his own magic, and his eyes find mine.

“You did this!” Erin aggressively screams, and I look back at her. She doesn’t move, but her eyes find mine, her body crackling with magic. “You killed him!”

“I’m sorry, Erin,” I tell her, but I know it will mean nothing to her. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and this is a fight for gods. I walk over to her, and she clutches at his body like she can hold him away from death when he is clearly gone.

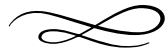
I don’t expect her to stand up quickly and attack me in a fury-filled lash of power. I barely have time to defend myself with my own magic before I jump under her magic, rolling out

near her feet and using Morganis to cut at her legs. She cries out, and I punch her hard in the stomach as I stand and spin around, smacking her legs with my foot, and she goes down like a rock.

“Magic is always the only weapon you should use,” I tell her, leaning down. I call my magic, and it laces around her body like vines, and she tries to fight only to find her power is lacking. I hold up Morganis. “She absorbs evil, and it makes her more powerful. Powerful enough to bind you for a little.”

I wanted to use Morganis on Cenwyn, but taking Erin out is needed. Her eyes look empty and hollow as I stand up and let the vines wrap tighter around her. Callahan lands next to me, and I watch Valentine heading into the battle. What is left of it. Callahan is covered in blood, but I still let him grab me and Erin and take us back home.

Six



“IS THAT TIGHT ENOUGH?” I question the male angel sitting on a stone seat in front of me. His name is Kotk, and he has brilliant red hair that matches his red freckles and sparkling blue eyes. I tug on the white bandage that is turning green thanks to the healing balm that is plastered on the long cut on his arm.

“Yes, thank you,” he replies with a tense smile. This is odd for all of us, and I look around the temple filled with the injured and healers and anyone like me who can just help with little things. Kotk has a nasty cut spreading all the way down his arm, deep enough to see the bone. There’s blood all over my hands from roughly stitching it closed and wrapping it up for him. I did not know how to stitch until today when I was shown quickly by some healers. I’ve helped countless angels and wolves with little cuts, and no one has said a word about my bad stitching.

The healers needed every pair of hands that they could find. Most of the angels have gotten into the city safely, and their numbers are impressive and larger than we thought. It’s impossible to count how many got into the city, but we suspect it’s a couple hundred thousand. We have much needed spies out there in Cenwyn’s army, and I know they will help us when the day comes.

“You’re the alpha female, right?” Kotk questions, looking behind me at the four guards standing close. They give the angel death stares.

I nod, and he looks puzzled. “Why are you here, then? Surely you should be hidden away?”

“What court are you from?” I ask.

He looks proud. “From Fenrir, of course.”

“Of course,” I say. “And do females fight in your court?”

“Some,” he replies. “But none of high rank and birth like you. You’re the alpha female.”

“And there is no other place for me than fighting on the front and helping our allies,” I say. “If I were you, I’d be happy to see a female fighting at your side. We aren’t dolls for males.”

“I—I didn’t mean—”

I cut him off. “I know you didn’t. We do things differently here, and when this war is over, maybe you will look back and help teach the female children that an alpha female fought to save the world and didn’t hide.”

His eyes widen, and I turn away, leaving him to his own thoughts. I look around for the next person to help, passing through the hastily made passageways. Ragnar walks over to me, leaving a couple of healers he was talking to.

“Mate,” he whispers to me, kissing my cheek. I sigh at the contact, sinking into him. My legs, arms, and all of me is aching with tiredness, and I can feel he is just as tired as I am. He takes my hands and softly starts wiping them with a plain wet cloth until the worst of the blood is gone. “Most of the people are healed, and any left need healers.”

“Good,” I say, relieved.

“We’re going to stay and organise everything with the healers and make sure every angel has a bed. But could you take Deimos and Niall back to the castle?” he questions. I know my alphas want me to go and relax, and this is their clever way of giving me a reason to go. I smile at them and their tricky ways.

I love them so much.

Ragnar's eyes soften. "Of course," I agree.

I would be lying if I wasn't a little relieved that I can go and rest for a bit. Blood isn't my strong suit, and I really want to check in on the children. Plus, I'm exhausted from using all that power and capturing Erin.

I still need to figure out what to do with her. I glance around the room one more time before looking at Ragnar. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," he says, kissing my forehead. "We've got this. I'll meet you soon in our room when I can."

"I'll be there," I breathe out before forcing my tired legs to move away from my mate when I just want to sink into his touch. I walk to the door, my guards at my back, and I pause when I pass Callahan, who is helping lay down a female angel who is passed out. I hand him a blanket, and we both tuck it around her.

"She will be fine," Callahan explains. "She was with the Styx Court and was poisoned with Levi's blood. The healer extracted the blood, but she passed out. It's common, apparently. I'm going to wait until she wakes to let her know she is fine."

"You're a wonderful male," I say quietly, looking into his eyes. "I'm sorry I didn't come to see you more. I'm sure you heard, but things have been a little crazy recently."

He smiles. "Breelyn told me you have been constantly asking after me." He softens his voice. "I didn't have the heart to tell her I can feel you are fine, and you know I am through the bond we share."

I search his eyes. "Have you told her?"

"No," he replies, a tic in his jaw appearing. "I don't know how to explain how we have that bond without upsetting her."

"Callahan," I softly say. "It was life or death for us. She will understand that, just like the alphas do."

"So they know?"

“Yes,” I reply. “I told them, well, showed them, in my thoughts the other night. They were pissed off, but more at the world for putting us both in that position. Breelyn will understand this. There is nothing between us like that, as much as I treasure you as a dear friend.”

He nods, agreeing but clearly not wanting to talk about this anymore. “Did you put Erin in the dungeons okay?”

His eyes darken with fading anger. “I did. She didn’t really fight back or anything as I shut the door and locked it, blocking her magic off and your vines. She didn’t fight at all.”

“I don’t think she’s fighting back after she lost that angel of hers,” I reply. I feel sorry for her, even despite everything she has done. I have to tell her the truth, convince her, and help her heal somehow. But until the war is over, she isn’t leaving that prison.

He nods, but his eyes track across the room, looking for one wolf in particular. I follow his gaze to see Breelyn leaning down, talking to a male angel. I don’t need to look at Callahan to sense his jealousy and longing.

“Oh, Callahan,” I say. “I know what it’s like to love someone and be unsure how they feel. Take the leap.”

“I’ve got things to do,” he tightly replies and bows to me before leaving—and not in Breelyn’s direction. I know I shouldn’t interfere with their love life, but all I want to do is smack their heads together until they both have some sense. I know they like each other, love even, and it’s just a matter of one of them actually admitting to it.

Stubborn supernatural beings.

I head outside the temple, into the cold air and the bright light of the morning sun. The steps are full of angels, some sleeping or just sitting down. All of them watch me, their eyes wary. I’m sure it’s my alpha female title, the goddess part of me, or the show of magic that has them fearful.

It doesn’t take me long to find Deimos, his mate Indra, and Niall by the royal carriage. They are surrounded by their own guards, a mix of uniforms and symbols. The guards let me

through as my own stay near, and I rush to Niall. He squeezes me tightly, kissing the top of my head.

“I saw what you did with the barrier and the witch wolf,” he tells me with a huff of a laugh. “And I’m impressed you’re still standing.”

I chuckle. “Don’t test that theory. I’m happy you’re okay and here.”

“Same, Maiy,” he replies, hugging me tightly one more time before letting me go. Deimos is looking between us, his own clothes covered in dried blood like Niall’s and Indra’s. All their eyes are haunted, and I know they lost good males today.

“How do you two know each other?” Deimos asks.

“That is a long story, my old friend,” Niall replies. “Maybe when we have a drink in our hands, I will explain it to you.”

“What do the wolves even drink in this pack?” Deimos questions me. “It’s old and I expect some alpha has a secret trove of decent wine.”

“You’d have to ask the alphas,” I reply with a smile.

“Your city, and pack, is a lot bigger than I expected,” Deimos replies, his eyes watching me. “I expect my children to be saved when this is over. I will leave if it’s clear we won’t win.”

“You have my word. I will do everything I can to help you save them,” I reply to him.

“With a goddess on my side, how could we fail?” he replies with a little humour. “Thank you for the tents for our men. They will be thankful for a warm bed for the night.”

I nod. Our wolves set up thousands of tents all around the castle, and each tent can house at least five angels. Apparently, they were used in the early days of the city being expanded and when there wasn’t enough housing. Other tents are just made of stitched clothes, blankets, and rags.

Everyone’s going to have a bed tonight, and if they don’t have a tent, some wolves are opening their homes for the angels, anyway. I’m proud of the wolves who are being open-

mindful and listening to my mates' commands. There are still some who resist, and I understand their hesitation to let angels in. Some of them are just stubborn and stuck in their ways. Some feel like they would rather die than work with them, but thankfully, only a small amount feel that way. The rest of the pack wants to fight, to embrace change and change the entire world. The angel king must fall. That's a familiar thought I've heard, a shared sentiment.

We climb into the carriage after the footman opens the door for us. I sit by Niall on one side, opposite Deimos with Indra at his side. The carriage soon takes off, rolling through the quiet streets, the scent of death and fear still high in the air.

"I want to tell you both that I didn't realise the new shield wouldn't let you in and I'm deeply sorry. It was my mistake, it cost your males lives and I wish it didn't happen. We had to make a new shield with stronger magic...and it was too strong. The only good part is that we are safe until we need to let the shield down to fight," I say.

"Magic is tricky to master, and you are young," Deimos states with haunted eyes, "and it always has a high cost. This time, it was my fighters."

"And mine," Niall states. "But we all knew what we were risking and what the prize could be at the end of this. We have come here, and we are the last hope the world has left. This is where it ends for everyone, one way or another."

A shiver races down my spine.

"It must be very overwhelming, Mai," Indra quietly says into the silence.

"Say it," Deimos commands of me, and my wolf growls back.

"Her mates might not be here to say it, but I will. She is the queen of this pack, and you never command a queen," Niall angrily states.

Deimos tightens his jaw. "I know you are judging me for using some of my guards as a distraction. Don't think it didn't cost me to send them out there, and don't think it didn't break

my heart to do so. Each one of those angels knew what they were signing themselves up for. Many of them only cared about getting their mates into this place and securing their safety. Do you understand? I don't need your judgment."

"I wasn't thinking that," I carefully say. "And I understand that we all make very difficult sacrifices for the greater good. I have yet to have to make one that completely destroys me, and I pray to the gods I will never have to before this is over."

"Thank you," he says with a sharp nod, looking away. Indra takes his hand, and I swear I see a tear leave Deimos's eye.

"How is Serendipity?" Niall asks, changing the subject and trying to give them some privacy, as much as we can in this carriage.

"She is fine, happy even. Phim is her best friend, and she even hugs some of my mates...but she still ignores me," I tell him.

"She's just stubborn. It's not really about you, but what you represent: change," he tells me.

"I'm not giving up, Niall," I say firmly. "I know exactly where she gets her stubbornness from, and it's from me. So if she is going to act like a brick wall, then I'm just going to be strong and steady until a door appears."

He smiles at me. "I'm glad to hear that your mates are being so accepting of her."

I chuckle. "One of them, not saying who, decided to gift her a sword and promised to teach her ways to destroy a male in less than two seconds with it. So I'm not sure they quite understand children yet."

"A sword?" he deadpans with wide eyes. I nod and we both laugh, even though I think it's really sweet.

"Well, I suppose she does just need to learn to defend herself, but I was hoping she would start around the age of six," he replies.

“Maybe seven,” I say with a wink. “Or sixteen, like you told me once?”

“I was planning on secretly training you at twelve, and I had a bow and arrows made for you,” he tells me. I rest my head on his shoulder, holding his arm. Niall was right. I did always have a dad and never knew it. I don’t know where my biological father is, and I don’t care anymore. I have Niall.

We carry on through the city in near silence before we come to the castle, and I sigh a breath of relief at being home. There are already several guards and maids waiting outside for us. All of them bow when I step out. I walk over to two of the maids who I recognise from the castle. They are twins with matching greying hair, and their names sound similar too, making it nearly impossible for me to tell them apart.

“This is Niall, who would like to go and see Serendipity immediately,” I say, introducing them. “And this is Deimos and his mate, Indra. Please take them to a room and make sure they have everything they could possibly need?”

“Of course, Alpha Female Mairin,” they both say at the same time. One of the twins looks to Niall with a soft smile. He smiles right back at her, and the look they give each other is new. For me, at least. Niall doesn’t date...well, that I know of. The thought of him dating unsettles my stomach. “The children are in the kitchens and making a terrible mess for the cooks, who are not impressed.”

He laughs and her dark cheeks brighten. “Let’s see if I can save the kitchen from them, then.”

“Of course, sir,” she says, bowing her head.

“It’s Niall, you are?” he asks, and they are both walking away as I turn to Deimos and Indra.

Deimos looks at me. “I’m very tired, and I apologise for my outburst. Today has been trying.”

“I understand and it’s forgotten,” I say. “Go, get some rest. We can rest for a bit.”

He nods and heads after the other twin while the guards stay with me. I head through the castle, winding through the

deep corridors and bookcases. This castle used to make me feel overwhelmed and lost, but now there is nothing but calm and peace in my heart as I walk through my home. This is my home, and I never want to leave. I'm getting to know every little turn and curve, even if it feels sometimes like the castle is moving itself, twisting and making it impossible to find the same route twice.

The castle almost seems to direct me from where I want to go when my hands run across some of the books on the bookcase walls, begging it to help me. I turn a corner and come to a well-guarded room. A very familiar room. It feels like so long ago that I stood in this room and had my first real conversation with Reine about my mates. She pretty much chewed me up and spit me back out, figuring out everything about me she needed to know without having to do anything. I could really use learning how she did that. The guards open the stained glass doors for me to step in, and they close them behind me.

The beautiful painted ceiling looks so much more alive than the fragile looking female on a bed in the middle of the room. She's tucked in neatly, the quilts absolutely still around her outlined body, and it looks like she hasn't moved in a very long time. Her grey hair is spread around the cream pillow, and there's no makeup on her face. She looks so calm and at peace, and a million miles away from the fierce female I've known my entire life. Her hands are resting on her stomach on top of the pale cream sheets. The floor around the bed is littered with pink petals and silver coins that crunch as I walk over them. The petals and coins are a traditional way of trying to coax someone back from the brink of death. They're given to the sick, and the glowing stones are given to the dead.

I still remember all the glowing stones I put on Daniel's grave, which seems so long ago since I saw him. I miss him and wish he was here to see all of this. To help with Jesper. But he is with Mike now, and they are with the gods.

There was nothing I could do to save him, but I hope there is something, anything, I can do to save Aunt Reine from this. I sit gently on the edge of the bed and place my hand on top of

hers. Her skin is cold, freezing to the touch, but her chest still rises up and down.

“I don’t even know what I want to say to you.” I blow out a breath. “I’m now the alpha female, just like you, and I wish you were here to help guide me through this. It might be selfish, but we need you. I need you. Your sons need you. The pack does.”

Silence is my only reply. I very much notice that my hands still have drops of dried blood on them, such a contrast to the paleness of the sheets and her skin.

I clear my throat and look at her face. “The pack is on the brink of war, Aunt Reine. Erin is in the prisons, and I don’t know who to ask about her mother and who she is. She could help us...but maybe not. I accidentally killed the angel she loved, well, we both did. Our power explodes when we attack each other. The shield is up around the pack, but we all know that we can’t live in here indefinitely with an army outside. We need to take them out and be smart. We need you.”

Still more silence.

“We’re all worried that you’re not going to come back to us, that Soren’s death broke you. If that is your choice, then I hope you say hello to my mum and watch over us. If there is any part of you still in there, please fight. Please come back. I’ve already lost my mum, and I’ve lost every female role model that I’ve ever had...and it leaves me clueless how to even look after my own daughter. I want you to meet my daughter and see how special she is. I know you’d love her. Come back, Aunt Reine. Please.”

The room seems so quiet when she never replies, and I look down. I don’t know what I was hoping for, but if any of my words help her come back, then this time was worth it. I stand up and quickly use the bathroom to clean up, to wipe all the blood off me until I don’t look too bad. I leave Reine’s room, my guards trailing behind me on the way down to the kitchen. I hear her little giggle echo up the corridor as I tell the guards to wait at the top of the stairs, followed by Jesper’s quiet voice responding. I smile to myself, happy he is out of

his room. I keep my footsteps silent as I go to the open door and lean in the archway, looking into the room from the shadows. Niall is tickling Serendipity as she tries to eat a cookie. Her chuckles are like a reward for fighting so hard. For today.

Jesper is trying to eat as much as he can before Trey beats him. Both of them have a mouth stuffed with cakes and cookies. Phim is spreading chocolate frosting on the cakes, and she winks at me.

Serendipity notices me next, going silent, and Niall pauses. She looks straight into the shadows, where I am not sure she can see me, but she never looks away. I suspected Phim or Niall to notice I'm here with their senses, but Dip is young. The boys too.

I walk into the room. "Hello."

"We are making cinnamon and raisin cookies," Phim tells me with a tired huff. "You look tired. Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I'm not tired, but I am a little hungry," I say.

"We were going to have chocolate chip, but there was only enough chocolate for the frosting," Jesper tells me, and I smile at him.

"We need to get some imported soon," I say, even though it's going to be a long time.

Trey comes over and hugs me tightly before letting go. "I'm happy you're okay. Everyone said you saved the angels."

"I was there," I say carefully. I look at Serendipity. "Hi, how are you?"

She looks up at Niall, who gives her a firm look I've got to learn. She seems to almost sigh, so much sarcasm in such a little girl. "Do you want a cookie? I made them."

She offers me a cookie, and it's the first thing my daughter has ever given me in her life, and I near enough call the cookie a holy object.

I feel my mates' joy and happiness radiating with my own as my chest could burst with happiness. It's only a cookie, but it's an olive branch, I just know it.

"Thank you," I say. "I actually brought you something."

"Come on, Trey, Jesper. I want to get some training in before bed, and you both could do with working off the cake," Phim instructs. They both groan but follow her out, and I try not to smile as I reach into my pocket and pull out a tiny book. I kept it with me all through the fight, hoping it would bring me some sort of luck or be a reason to fight on if I needed one. To give her this.

She looks between me and the book before softly taking it out of my hands. I nibble on the cookie as she reads the title, struggling for the words, and then I tell her, "It's a book of fairy tales. Human fairy tales, but they are amazing."

"I love books," she tells me, and my heart swells. I went to the library and asked for a book that would be suitable and funny enough. It gave me this book. I used to read it loads to Jesper and to myself.

"My favourite story in the book is the one about a little girl who goes into the forest and finds everything she's ever wanted and wished for. Gold, food, warmth, and luxury, but she was alone. It was all a trick, and when she comes home, she finds what she truly wanted all along. Her family."

She looks at me, her eyes saying a million different things. Gods, she is so beautiful. "Will you read one to me?"

My heart pounds as I nod, and I take the book from her when she offers me it. There's two little couches in the corner by the fire, and we all go and sit on them. I don't take it offensively when Dip doesn't actually sit with me. She sits next to Niall as far away from me on the couch as she can possibly get, but she's still close, and Niall seems to think it's a good breakthrough, if his eyes say anything. I start reading the story to my little girl. One of many, many stories. I miss reading so much. It feels like a lifetime ago that I was in the foster home just reading books to escape my reality. After everything that happened today, this is just what I needed. Just

a moment with my daughter to read a story and for it to be absolutely nothing more than that. When the story ends, I close the book and notice Serendipity has moved across the couch. Her head is resting on my arm, her warmth soaking into me, and she puts her hand over mine.

“Another one? Please?” she sweetly begs. I could never tell her no. I start reading the next story, and by the third, she is fast asleep, curled up under my arm. Silent tears fall down my cheeks as I pick my daughter up and cuddle her into my lap. Niall offers me a pale blue blanket, and I tuck it around her before standing up.

“I’m going to take her to her room,” I say. “You should get some rest. After the fight and everything, you must be exhausted.”

“So should you,” he suggests.

“Soon,” I say, snuggling my daughter closer. I head down the corridor with Niall, and I keep breathing in my daughter’s amazing scent of water lilies on a summer day, holding her so close to me like I never have to let her go again. My mum used to scent like water lilies too and some part of her lives on in my daughter, as well as me. I know there will come a day when I won’t even be able to carry her as she will be too big, and I’m going to treasure every day I can do this.

I frown when I see who is leaning against Dip’s door. Draycian straightens up, his eyes flickering from me to my daughter, and I narrow my eyes back at him. “Another time.”

I watch as he disappears into bright light, and I blow out a breath.

“That’s a problem,” Niall quietly says, and I can only nod. He opens the door for me, and I go into her small bedroom filled with teddies and toys and paintings she has made hanging on the wall. Her white sheets are now replaced, and there’s a light pink sheet, with white stitched stars at the bottom of the comforter. I softly tuck her into the bed and kiss her on her forehead before watching her for a bit and going back out to Niall. Five guards walk over from the other side of the room and make a line in front of the door.

“I’m waiting in bed, mate,” Ragnar whispers down our bond. It’s not sexual, but it’s a lure to get my ass to bed before he carries me to it and forces me to rest.

“Goodnight,” I tell Niall, feeling so tired. I give him a hug one more time before heading back to my room. My legs are aching, and every part of me feels tired. I barely remember climbing into bed, curling around Ragnar before falling straight to sleep.

Seven

S

SILAS FALL

I WAKE up from a dream of Hades telling me repeatedly that something's wrong, then not to hurt her, and I have no fucking idea what he was talking about. The room is warm and smells like my mate. I smile, stretching my hand across the sheet for her when something sharp presses against my neck, and I go deadly still. I look up into the darkness, my eyes slowly adjusting to make out Mai's face as she leans over me, holding a dagger to my throat. It's not Morganis, but my own dagger, and this is not Mai. Her eyes are nothing but pure blackness coated with edges of wicked green. Her hair looks brighter, but her skin has a dull colour to it, and she has such a strange look on her face, one that I've never seen my Mai have before. It's cruel, ancient, and very, very immortal.

We must have been too exhausted today with the drain on our magic, and she has used that to slip into Mai's mind. Persephone has taken control again. She's naked on top of me, but my body doesn't react at all, knowing damn well that this is not my mate.

"Persephone," I growl. "Give me my mate back."

She laughs as a response, leaning down closer. She presses the dagger more firmly against my neck, and I feel hot drops of my blood dripping down. Every instinct to fight is battling with my need to protect my mate. I don't want to hurt her. I do want to hurt Persephone for taking over my mate's body and mind, but while she's in my mate, I can't risk hurting her body either.

"How hard it must be for the protective one to have no control," she teases.

"Give me my mate back!" I snarl.

"You really shouldn't be making demands, and try thinking past those possessive tendencies of yours and see the bigger picture," she all but coos, stroking her hand down my chest. It

feels wrong, like I'm betraying Mai, and I've had enough. I slam red shadows out of my chest, right into her, and she flies across the room, slamming into the wall. My heart tears open at doing that to my mate, but it isn't her. I need to remember that. I call my brothers, or try to, but everything is silent. The pack and mate bond is tinted with darkness.

Her darkness.

She is using her power to block us away from the world. The door handle jiggles before four guards rush in, shifted, and they all growl as they search the room for danger.

"Oh fun, toys to play with," Persephone says, standing up.

"Get out," I command them. They warily look between Mai and me, and they don't know it's not her. They do listen to me and leave, and I stand up off the bed, going to the door and shutting it to protect them from her. I pull the shadows in the room around us, blocking us away from the world as I deal with this goddess.

"I remember Hades doing that. It was one of his favourite tricks," she sighs, running her hand through the shadows. "They never hurt me. They couldn't. Like you will never hurt your mate, even with me in here."

I growl.

She runs her finger over her cut lip and stares at the blood. "Oh, to be mortal and so breakable."

"I don't give a fuck who you are, Persephone. I want my mate back, and you need to piss off to wherever you came from. Hell, I suspect," I bite out.

She sucks the blood off her finger and shrugs a shoulder as she laughs. Persephone's laugh is nothing like the sweet laugh that I love to hear from Mai. I hate this. I hate that she can take over her body so easily, and we only have to slip up a little for this to happen. A tiny gap, that's all she needed to take over. "There are rules, and some rules should not be broken, alpha. Hell or heaven is a place most can go to when they die. But not us. Not after what we did. Not after what the Wolven gods did to punish us."

I frown at her, trying to figure out what she is talking about. “What did you do?”

She looks between me and the wall next to her before smiling. “We unlocked our leashes, and they punished us. All four of us. Seven with the souls spilt.”

Seven of them...seven weapons. The Wolven gods.

“Don’t think too much, alpha. It’s not for you to figure out, only she can. Make sure you tell her what I’ve told you when she is back,” she replies with a calculating smile. “I’ve never actually been against you or the idea of love you share. True mates are so very rare and special. Not even the gods can touch their connection. Zeus always did try, though.”

Cenwyn’s god. What a fucking lovely surprise.

“But Zeus had a weakness. He was always cursed with one,” she says. “Have you not figured it out yet, alpha?”

“No,” I snap.

She smirks. “My mate had a bit of wolf deep underneath the surface of his soul, even if he couldn’t shift into one himself. He did command wolves, like any alpha could do. It’s what alphas do, right?”

“As much as this conversation is interesting...I want my mate back.”

She laughs as she picks up a shirt from the cabinet near her and pulls it over her head. It’s one of mine, and it falls to her knees.

“I find it impressive that you don’t even seem remotely attracted to me.”

I glower. “You are not my mate. As much as my mate’s body is beautiful beyond anything I’ve ever seen, it’s her soul that I’m in love with. It’s *her* that makes me hard, and you never will.”

She hums to that. “I remember what love was once, but it has been many, many years since I’ve felt that. Sometimes it feels like a breeze, real but gone in a second. I’ve been trapped

for so long, it almost becomes difficult to remember who I was before.”

Trapped? Does she mean soul bonded? She moves quickly while I’m slightly distracted and presses something on a plain wall. The floor spins with the wall until it’s the same wall but the other side, covered in cobwebs and dust, and Persephone is on the other side.

“Fuck,” I mutter. How long has this secret door been here? This castle is too damn secretive. I search around the wall, touching the grooves in the wallpaper before I feel an indent. I push into it, and the wall moves with the floor, spinning us into a new room. I use my power to light everything up in red energy, showing me an old corridor that hasn’t been used in a very long time. In the distance, I spot Persephone running from me, and I chase after her. I turn around two bends, through three empty cavern rooms before we come to the end, where she is clearly leading me.

I nearly bump into her as I come to a stop, and she is standing just inside the room, looking around. She raises her hands and lets out spheres of green light. Seven of them, to be exact, and they float to stone pillars, lighting them up the second they touch. The room is flooded with green light, and all I see is weapons everywhere and pedestals with soft green cushions on top.

“You may think I’m the villain, alpha, and I’ve done a lot of things that would suggest that, but perhaps giving me the benefit of the doubt would be best for you now. The Wolven Crown is the key, and the Wolven gods have the lock. The seven are needed too. We are linked by them, and you don’t have a lot of time to figure it all out.”

Persephone collapses to the ground, and I instinctively catch her and pull her up into my lap as I kneel on the damp stone, running my eyes over my mate.

I’m still running my eyes over her when she wakes up and her beautiful green gaze locks on mine. I groan in relief. “Thank fuck.”

“You’re hurt,” she softly says, sitting up and touching my neck near where the cut is.

“I’m fine, it’s nothing,” I tell her.

She frowns, looking around. “It really smells. Where are we? What happened? I was sleeping...”

“Persephone happened,” I tell her. I gently repeat everything that’s happened so far, her eyes widening at every bit of the story, and she touches her cut lip that I feel guilty for. She senses my guilt through our bond, even if it’s a little dampened still. I can feel my brothers trying to get through, and it won’t be long before they come looking for us.

She shakes her head, her eyes burning with anger and possibly jealousy. “You did the right thing. That bitch.”

I soothe her by stroking her back. “I’m yours, Mai. Only yours.”

She nods, but I can still feel the jealousy and anger riding her. I carry on talking to calm her wolf down a little before she shifts. “We let the barrier slip at the battle. I’m sure that’s when she got through and then just waited.”

“I felt her on the battlefield. It felt like she was pushing a hot poker into my mind.”

She shivers and I frown. My mate is cold, and I’m sitting here talking. “We should get you back to our room. It’s freezing down here.”

“Let’s just see what she led us to first, in case we struggle to find it again. I’m okay,” she tells me, and I sigh. She does have a point, but I still want to throw her over my shoulder, take her back to our bed, and remind her that I’m wholly hers.

We both stand up, and she looks at the pillars. “Didn’t know I could do that.”

I rub her back as we head further into the room. “It’s strange here...like it’s—”

“Hidden,” she interrupts. “There was a shield of sorts around this place, but what was it hiding?”

“There are seven cushioned pedestals,” I point out.

Seven. Always seven.

Mai holds out her hand and sends vines of magic to the pedestals. When each vine touches the pedestals, they begin to glow green, and something starts to appear on each one. We watch the nearest one to us as Morganis appears, Iris and Chaitala appearing on the other ones. The other four each have their own weapon on them.

I feel my mate’s shock as we both look at one of the pedestals. There’s a very familiar book sitting on it. I look around at the weapons, instantly recognising their power, and I know why we should have recognised that book in the first place. “The book is one of the seven. All of the seven are here.”

“A book isn’t a weapon like the others,” Mai replies.

I stare hard at the book. “Books are better than any weapon in the world, stronger than any wolf or angel could be. I’m sure it could destroy you by simply reading it.”

“Oh gods above, I did read it,” she mutters, and I kiss the side of her head.

“If it wanted to hurt you, it could have. So could have Morganis, Chaitala or Iris. There are myths of them sucking souls out of wolves, killing humans with one touch. They clearly don’t want you hurt.”

She nods in agreement. “But why?”

“I don’t know,” I frustratedly admit as we walk closer to look at the others. There is a silver arrow, a gold axe and a sharp-looking blue necklace.

I lift my gaze from the seven weapons to the rest of the room. Every inch of the walls is lined with magical weapons, and all of them feel powerful. They aren’t like the seven, but I definitely think they could help in this war, because Hades made them, and he has left tiny drops of his power here. I can sense it.

“This room could save a lot of lives,” I say.

“Definitely,” she agrees, her eyes looking at the armoured knights at the back of the room, rows and rows of knights’ armour. Black, shining armour with our symbol on the breastplate.

Mai wraps her arms around me, holding me tightly. I pick her up, and she wraps her legs around my waist. I watch her, holding her in my arms. I could look at her forever and never once get bored. It’s not just her beauty, it’s her. I start to spin us around, dancing to no music and just holding her.

Her smile lights up my chest. She brushes some stray wisps of hair behind my ear, reminding me I need a haircut.

The hint of desire in her scent makes any thought other than taking her back to our room disappear. “We should go back to bed, just a bit.”

I make sure that the others know we are fine and on our way, so I get her alone for a bit. It might make me selfish, but we don’t have forever, and I want this moment.

“That, my mate, is a very good idea.”

I carry her out of the room and enjoy the scent change as her skin presses against mine. I’m never letting her go again.

* * *

I punch Ragnar hard, sending him crashing across the mat, and my hand aches from the hit. He growls as he rolls to a stop, and I shrug, getting back into position. “Your right side was unprotected. Do better.”

“Bastard,” he replies, but he knows I’m right.

I look over to see Callahan talking with Breelyn and Mai. The bastard angel still hasn’t come to us about what happened with Mai, and I don’t like it. I’ve been debating with my brothers how much time we should give him to be a man and speak to us, but it’s gone on too long now. Mai is still worried about it, and even though we do understand, this is a problem between alphas and betas. He is my second-in-command, a male I do trust, and I need to teach him a lesson.

“Callahan, you’re up,” I shout over. Ragnar looks between us and shakes his head.

“Don’t break him,” Henderson suggests, walking past. “Too much.”

“I disagree with that,” Valentine says to us all in the bond. He sits behind the girls, working on riddles in his notebook for Mai.

I smile as Mai tries and fails to peek in the book.

Callahan pulls off his shirt and throws it to the side. I chuck a sword his way, and he catches it.

“You seem...mad,” he asks, starting to circle me. I stand still, waiting for him to attack. For a moment, I block out my mate through the bond. Callahan and I have unfinished business. He strikes and I smoothly sidestep, spinning on my foot and bringing my sword down. He blocks me, just like I expected him to do, and I smirk as our swords clash, the metal sound ringing through the room. He doesn’t pause, straight back to the attack. Only years of training let me block it and hit right back where he is weak. We are quite equally matched, and he is well trained, but I am not just a wolf. With a bit of my magic laced into my palms, only a little, I punch him hard in the chest. He slips backwards, and the room goes silent. He uses his wings to soften the blow and pants as he straightens up.

“What the fuck was that?”

“I’m your alpha. Careful,” I growl, walking over and attacking again. He blocks me, and I easily slip through his defences, predicting his moves and smacking him hard in the back. He stumbles and I knock him over. He picks himself up and frowns, wiping some blood off his cheek where my sword cut him.

“Silas!” Mai calls. Her voice is nothing short of a warning tone that I plan to completely ignore.

I walk over and pull Callahan closer, my sword pressed against his neck. “If you ever feed off my mate again, if you ever give her pleasure like that, I will fucking kill you. The

only reason you aren't dead right now is because you both didn't have a choice. You are my beta, Callahan, and you should have told me. Told us."

His eyes stay on mine. Guilt. Anger. But mostly, he knows he should have told me. "You're right, I should have done, alpha."

"A life for a life. You saved her, and this is me sparing you. I've killed for less," I warn him and push him away.

"How could you?" I hear Breelyn quietly ask as I turn and see her standing in front of Mai.

"I'm sorry, it was—"

"I don't want to hear it," she snaps at my mate. A low growl echoes around my chest, and Mai turns her gaze to me, her eyes narrowed.

Fuck, she is pissed.

Double fuck, it's making me hard.

She looks back at Breelyn, who has tears streaming down her cheeks. Callahan walks right past me and to her.

Breelyn looks sharply at him. That is a look that would scare most males, but Callahan doesn't falter. That look, and how strong she is, is why she is our beta. "Breelyn, let me—"

The slap rings through the room as her hand clashes with his cheek. He snarls back at her and grabs her, throwing her over his shoulder. She screams and kicks at him, but he doesn't let her go as they leave.

I clap my hands. "Well, now that is sorted—"

"Sorted?" Mai questions. Henderson, Valentine and Ragnar quickly find somewhere else to be. "Gods, you are a right bastard at times."

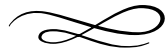
I grin. "But I'm yours and you love me. My possessive wolf and all."

She picks up Callahan's fallen sword and walks into the training ring, her eyes flashing with fury. "Stop talking."

“Yes, my alpha female,” I taunt, bowing my head, and when she strikes, her anger only has her underneath me quickly, and I say sorry in the best way I can.

By making her moan my name with her mates watching. Enjoying.

Eight



I WALK DOWN the corridor towards the room with the weapons, pulling a cart behind me. My muscles are stretching from the brief break I took to run with my wolf around the castle grounds, my alphas joining me in the forest. The forest isn't the same anymore, not with how many angels are in the borders and how many fill the skies of our city. We are getting cramped, but no one is voicing that issue when war is so close. We all know we are outnumbered with the Levi, and my mates are spending every hour trying to figure out battle plans to give us an edge. We all know that there isn't much we can do.

I hate it.

Cenwyn will not win this war. He can't.

I close my eyes for a second, pushing those thoughts to the back of my mind. I have a job to do. I've spent the last five days sorting out the weapons Persephone led us to and giving them to our army and the angels. Deimos, Indra, and Niall pass me by as they carry on taking down weapons from the walls. They incline their heads before going back to their conversation. It's been nice to have them around the castle, even if Deimos likes to run around the castle at two in the morning to keep fit. Silas has been joining him. They are both insane.

I glance at the carts lining the room, and how many weapons are in them. We think there are just under four thousand magical weapons in this room. I'm sure each one

was owned by someone in Hades's army years ago. I head through the room, to the secret doors we found on day two. The room leads off to a long corridor with several domed areas attached to it. We are working to get the weapons out of here, and then angels are taking them as quickly as they can around the city to all the wolves and angels, evenly spreading them out between their best fighters.

I come to a grinding halt when I step into the room I left an hour ago. Breelyn is right where I was, taking a big axe off the wall and putting it into a cart. Callahan is on the other side of the room, and he turns, sensing me here. I wasn't using my senses, and I should have as I would have known he came down here. He nods at me and looks between us before he turns away. I blow out a breath and keep my eyes on Breelyn.

"Do you want me to leave?" I softly question.

I feel like I'm putting my heart out there for her, and I wouldn't be shocked if she stomps on it. I haven't seen her since what happened in training, and I don't think I will ever forget the way she looked at me. Like I was evil. I've tried to discuss it with her by going to her room, but she never answered the door, and I'm not going to make her talk to me.

She's completely ignoring me, and I don't blame her. I made a mistake. I don't feel *sorry* is going to cut it at this point. I should have told her, not Silas, not in the way it came out.

It wasn't really a secret, not in my eyes, but I should have known it would hurt her.

"No, don't leave," she says, and my chest could collapse with relief.

I do notice something different as I walk in and pull my cart into the middle of the room. Breelyn and Callahan scent like each other, and it's a deep connection, I'm sensing. Not quite a mating bond, but something has definitely changed. I try not to smile at it, because I am very happy for my friends.

But right at this moment, I'm still terrified that I've lost my best friend. I never knew I needed a female friend until she

was in my life, and despite our very rocky beginning, we were close. She walks up to me and pauses. “Callahan explained everything from the start, and I really hate that it happened.”

I gulp.

“I hate that you didn’t tell me when you had definitely had the opportunity to. I think I was jealous, and I reacted worse than I should have. I should have known you’d never have done that without a damn good reason.”

“I should have told you, and I’m so sorry for all of it,” I tell her. “It’s not like that between Callahan and me, and it could never be.”

“You’re good friends and that’s it,” she agrees. “Anyone could see that.”

Callahan stays silent, but I can tell he is listening to everything. “And you had no choice. You’d both be dead if it didn’t happen.”

“It really did mean nothing, and I honestly didn’t treat it as a secret. I showed the alphas, and they haven’t gone mad about it because they can see in my mind, and they can see it meant nothing. I just couldn’t let him die, and he needed to feed, and there was no one else, nothing else to save him.”

“I forgive you, Mai,” she says, cutting off my rambling. “Everything has gone to hell recently, and I love you. I know you didn’t mean to hurt me, but you can forgive me for calling Silas a dickhead.”

I chuckle. “No, I agree with that statement. Trust me, I told him off for the whole thing.”

She smiles at me and looks over at Callahan but speaks to me. “I’m sure you’re impatiently waiting for one of us to tell you about the elephant in the room.”

I grin. “Are you two mated? I can’t tell, maybe because of the angel-wolf mix.”

“We are promised. It is an angel tradition, and I am going to ask you and the alphas for permission to take Breelyn as my

mate later today,” Callahan tells me. Breelyn blushes, and I resist the urge to tease her a little.

“Well, my answer is yes, and I’m certain my alphas will not mind me giving you the permission,” I say, knowing they won’t.

“Good,” Callahan warmly says, bowing his head at me and walking to Breelyn. They kiss deeply, and she clutches his collar, and I look away.

After a minute, I clear my throat. “I know how awkward you guys must have felt when I kissed my mates in front of you.”

“Yeah, but times that by four,” Callahan deadpans after breaking the kiss. “And now I see why the alphas always growl at anyone who dared to interrupt.”

I laugh with Breelyn, who hushes him, and he smacks her ass as she walks away. “Congratulations, by the way,” I tell them both.

“Thank you, Mai,” Breelyn softly replies as we get back to work. I’m absolutely exhausted, as I’ve been doing this all day, but it’s second nature as I unclip the leather straps on a long broadsword. All twenty of them with fiddly straps.

“The seven are strange,” Breelyn says after a short while. “It’s like they’re trying to talk to us all the time and lure us to them.”

“What do they sound like?” I question.

Callahan answers. “Like the most desirable voice you’ve ever heard. For me, it’s Breelyn’s voice.”

“I hear Callahan too,” Breelyn admits. If the seven didn’t totally creep me out before, they do now. I wonder which one of my mates I would hear?

“Definitely me,” Valentine seductively whispers into my mind. “There is no doubt.”

“Fuck off, it would be me,” Silas growls. I smile and try to ignore their argument as Henderson and Ragnar get involved.

“Remember not to touch any of them,” I say, reminding them both. “They like me, and they don’t hurt me or the alphas, for that matter, but I’m not going to test it on anybody else. Who knows how it would react to an angel?”

“We won’t,” Callahan firmly replies. “We know it’s a trick, and both of us are tired of those.”

“Good, because there are a few things I fear, and those weapons are one of them. They are alive, they speak, and they control things. They kill people,” I breathe out. “I can feel their power, and it’s frightening.”

“It would be unwise not to be fearful of them,” Callahan agrees. “Most of us mortals fear god magic for a reason. It isn’t for us.”

“It isn’t indeed,” I agree. I finish unclipping the broadsword from its leather straps and carefully put it into my cart as quickly as possible. It weighs an absolute ton. I go over near Callahan and start pulling off a row of hunting knives clipped into the wall by moulded metal holders. He’s pulling off arrows and putting them in the cart before he goes back to help me with the knives on his side. There’s another thirty on his side, by my guess.

“I’ve been keeping an eye on Draycian around the castle. His males have left the city, but he just keeps appearing. No one had a bad word to say about his males other than they were silent,” Callahan tells me.

“He’s not always here, and he comes back, then disappears,” Breelyn adds in. “I suspect, but I might be wrong, that he needs to go to the city. He never wanted to leave.”

“Do you think he is bound to it in some magical way?” I question.

She shrugs. “If he is, he wouldn’t let me know or let me talk about it either way.”

“It still bothers me that he’s not demanded Dip,” Callahan says. “This would be the perfect time, as we are all distracted and busy, and he knows there is a war coming.”

“It bothers me too,” I admit.

“I think he isn’t a bad male, underneath it all, and if he did that, there wouldn’t be a soul in this pack that wouldn’t call him a monster and hunt him down when the war is over,” Breelyn says.

“I’m glad you’re both here,” I tenderly say. “I really don’t want you to go back with him again.”

Callahan tightens his grip on the wall but says nothing.

It must be very difficult for him, and I don’t even try to read his thoughts on it.

I feel Valentine’s presence before he steps into the room and walks over to me, kissing me softly as a greeting.

“Hi,” I breathe out.

“Hello, mate,” he replies with a smile. I love seeing him smile. I tuck some of his hair behind his ear, running my fingers down his soft beard that is growing in. “You need a haircut.”

He wraps his arms around me. “I liked the last one.”

“I bet you did,” I reply with a secretive grin. That was one of our first moments...being seriously attracted to each other. When he opened up to me and decided to change his ways. I’ll never forget it.

“But, you’re needed. The female you asked for is here, and the witch is awake. She hasn’t eaten in days or drunk anything. The healers are concerned that she might get sick if this continues,” he tells me.

“Okay,” I say, agreeing. “I won’t actually go in there, because she isn’t safe, but maybe speaking to her would help. I can’t imagine what it’s like to be in her position right now.”

“Who is this female you have asked for?” Breelyn questions, rubbing some dust off her hands on a rag.

“Someone who might have known her mother years ago. She is a friend of Reine’s and my mama’s,” I explain. “Her name is Chastity Fall.”

“You’re hoping that she will listen? That Chastity could try to turn her onto our side? Could we ever trust her even if she did?” Callahan questions.

“It’s not about that, but truthfully about giving her the answers she has been looking for. I grew up living a lie in Ravensword, and I know what it is like,” I reply. “She deserves an answer. She deserves the truth.”

Breelyn nods. “Just be careful. She is a liar.”

“I remember who she is,” I carefully reply.

Valentine wraps his arm around my waist, and we head through the passageways, which are now all lit up with lanterns, and back through our bedroom and into the corridor. We temporarily moved into another room, mostly because we all feel a bit freaked out that this bedroom has a whole network of tunnels right inside, most of which haven’t been explored. Until it’s completely mapped out, none of us are sure it’s the best idea to have that room to rest in.

“You have a big heart, my mate,” Valentine quietly whispers to me in the dim corridors of our home. “But be careful who you take pity on. She may seem sweet, but I am certain she is nothing more than a witch with an excuse to be evil.”

“I’ll be careful,” I tell him, leaning on his shoulder.

I know she isn’t me, but a part of me does sympathise with her, a little more than I should do.

We go all the way through the castle, down to the dungeons where Chastity is waiting for us at the top of the stairs, blocked by the guards. She turns to us, a bright smile on her face when she sees me. She bows low.

“It’s an honour to be called to help you both,” she says, walking to me. “By the gods above, I wish you both the best blessings. Your mating is a true reason to cheer.”

“Thank you, Chastity,” I tell her.

“So why exactly did you want me here?” she questions and points back at the guards in front of the door. “This is the

dungeons, I think. Unless you're locking me up for something I'm not aware I've done, I'm hopelessly clueless."

"Nobody's locking you up," Valentine says with a rare smile for another person.

I clear my throat. "I need you to look at someone and see if you recognise her. She was one of us, born with a bond to the gods. Her mum must have been pregnant around the time that we all were conceived, but after us as she is the eighth."

"By the sacred wolf," she whispers. "I did not know there was an eighth child born. We made a deal for only seven and were told there were only seven possibilities."

I've wondered that. How did Oisean bring an eighth into the world if there were only seven weapons to do it?

It makes no sense.

"The angels and King Cenwyn have convinced her that we're evil. That we're the bad guys and that her mother gave her away and didn't want her. I have a feeling that's not true. We don't just give away our young. No one does that. We protect them," I say.

"This is true. There wasn't a female in our pack who would have given a young one away," she agrees. "Especially not if she fought for them to be god bound."

"So, does anyone come to mind?"

She frowns. "I'm really sorry. There isn't anyone I can think of."

"Maybe you might see someone in her," I say, hoping I'm right.

"In return, would you allow me to see Reine?" she questions. "The guards have always said no one but the alphas are to see her."

"I'm sorry, you should be allowed to see your friend. It's been a bit mad here, and I'll make sure to remind the guards that you can come and go as you please," I explain, and Valentine nods in agreement.

“Thank you,” she happily sighs. “I was hoping I could talk to her and coax her out of this. Maybe she would know who the poor girl’s mother is.”

I bet Aunt Reine would know.

“Let’s go in,” Valentine suggests. The guards lead us down the stairs to the dungeons where they open the three padlocked doors for us before we go in. The room is warm, kept warm by a large fireplace in the centre, and the light from that makes it cosy in here. It’s nice in here for a prison. There’s a soft bed, even a little counter and a bathroom. I look at the tray full of food just inside her metal cage. She is sitting on the stone floor, her legs crossed, her face in her hands.

I can only sense pure, uncontrollable pain from her.

I’d think she was dying if she didn’t look fine. It’s her heart that is dying.

“Erin,” I softly say, stepping closer. She slowly looks up, her eyes bloodshot red from crying so much. She’s probably popped all the vessels. She looks so haunted, clearly devastated. She looks at me for a second before she turns away and faces the wall.

“You need to eat and drink. It’s no good for you not to,” I say, well aware she is going to block me out.

I remember not eating when I was captured by Ravensword.

I saw it as a way to punish myself and my captor and to pray for a quick death.

Glancing at Chastity, she sadly shakes her head, and my heart sinks. Without Reine, there is no one left who could know who she is.

“Let me walk you out,” Valentine says to Chastity, both of us sensing that she wants to leave.

“Thank her for me,” I whisper to Valentine through our bond as he walks up.

“Of course, my mate,” he replies.

“Erin,” I repeat her name to get her attention. “I don’t know how many times I’ve told you this, but we’re not your enemy. It probably doesn’t look like that because we locked you up in here, but I’m not against you. I’m trying to help you. Trying to find out who your mother was, if you’ve got a family still alive here, because there could be. Benjamin wouldn’t want you to give up on life—”

She sharply turns her head to me, her eyes bleeding with pain and anger. “You know nothing about what Benjamin would have wanted. And who cares? He’s dead! The only person who ever loved me is dead!”

“Erin...”

“No, you killed him...I killed him. He wouldn’t leave!” she sobs and turns away. “He is gone!”

She cries, she screams, she pleads for the gods to bring him back, and I listen to every sound until she calms down. I don’t want her to be alone, despite everything she has done.

When someone’s heart is breaking, that’s when they need someone to be there the most. Even if they don’t ask.

I use the only card I have left as I look at the food. She isn’t going to try to keep herself alive. “We have his ashes in our morgue,” I say, and we do. Someone dragged his body in with others, and the alphas were told. This gets her attention, and she turns on me. “I have his ashes in an urn made of green moss stone. The stone is meant to give the soul peace. It’s a tradition here to give the ashes to a loved one along with a glowing stone so he can be sent to the gods for you to meet again. The only condition I have is that you eat and drink, and I will bring them here. You can hate me all you want, but it’s a condition, nonetheless.”

She searches my eyes before she nods once and then turns away from me. I stand up and leave, letting the guards lock her away, and I hear her cries before they lock the door.

Nine



I LOOK DOWN at Serendipity and grip her tiny hand in my own. She's wearing a beautiful little pink flowery dress that sparkles when the light hits it, and she has a pink bow holding her blonde hair up. Her eyes, so similar to mine, look up at me, and she smiles. Every smile is something I will never forget. In the last two weeks, we have become so close, and even though she doesn't call me mama or mum or whatever she wants, I know we are getting somewhere. My own dress is silver with flowers making up the skirt, a tight corset for the top half, and a long ribbon belt around my waist. They match the silver ribbons in my hair that brush against my back as I walk. Despite all the silver, I have brief hints of my alphas in the little dark, shadowy red flowers that I pushed into my hair.

"Why are you wearing silver?" Dip questions.

"This is an omega ceremony, and it's custom to wear silver, like the ancient ribbons used to bind us," I explain to her.

"I hope I have omegas when I'm older," she says, sucking on her thumb afterwards.

I lean down and kiss the top of her head, breathing in her scent. "I'm sure you will. I'll be right there to celebrate with you, just like you are with me."

She smiles around her thumb, and it's too cute. Seraphim and Breelyn are already in the library, waiting in the clearing in front of the bookshelves. When I suggested where we

should have the omega ceremony and we started talking about it, Valentine sent me a message to ask us all to come to the library. The library had transformed itself into this beautiful space, making it very clear what it wanted.

Silver bells, tinsel and star ornaments hang from the ceiling and bookshelves. Soft, sparkling silver carpet now lines the floor, and there is an archway of silver flowers, ribbons and delicate icicles hanging off it. It smells lovely in here, the old book scent replaced by the sweetness of the flowers. Warm light fills the space, and I swear it sparkles everywhere as I smile at my sister and best friend.

Above them, hanging high, are three large silver bells. Apparently, they ring each time an omega is chosen and accepted by the gods. Then the large bell of the city will ring to tell the whole pack that there is a new omega of their pack. This time, it will ring twice for both of them. Henderson doesn't believe there has been an omega of Fall Mountain Pack in over a thousand years, and even then there was only one. With an angel as our beta, we are making a lot of new things happen, and I think it's good for our pack. Without change, we would freeze in time and be easily corrupted. Change is good.

We don't have long before the battle, a few days here or there before we have to attack on our terms. The shield is holding. That much is true, but people are restless, and we don't have enough supplies to keep everyone alive for much longer and well-fed. After a count, we realised we only have about two weeks left, and we need this fight to be on our terms. Usually, everyone stocks up food for the winter, and they hunt within the city borders, but the Levi destroyed a sizeable portion of the crops in the attack and killed a lot of the animals or scared the rest out of the city. Our wolves need to hunt outside the pack borders, especially with all the angels currently holding up here needing to be fed.

In our last war meeting, everyone agreed we need to fight when we are strong. That we have the weapons, the numbers, and there is a chance if we hit them strong. The only thing no one is talking about is the Levi and how the numbers we can

see might only be a tipping point to the amount hidden from our view.

My alphas stand near the door, and each of them runs their eyes over me, a blazing desire spreading down our bond.

Henderson clears his throat and steps closer. He holds out two silver flowers. "For my girls."

Dip makes a little giggle noise as she takes the flower, and he grins at her. I take the other one and slide it into my hair before kissing his cheek.

"You're so sweet, Hens," I whisper.

"Trust me, none of the thoughts when I saw you were sweet," he purrs back before walking away, leaving me all hot and bothered. Silas, Ragnar, and Valentine leave with Henderson and close the door behind them.

"Can you put this in my hair, Mai?" Dip asks me, holding up the flower. I notice right away that she is copying me, and I love it. I tuck the flower into the soft curls of her hair.

"Dip, you look so pretty!" Breelyn tells her. Dip has even won over Breelyn, who said once that she doesn't like children, but Dip is another matter. My daughter is going to be so spoiled by her aunts growing up.

I walk over, and Phim gives Dip a small hug before putting her on a white chair nearby so she can watch. She sucks on her thumb again, and I glance at both of my soon-to-be omegas. They're also in silver dresses as beautiful as my own.

"You ready for this?" I ask them both with a smile. "Last chance to back out and run away from a bond with me."

"If I didn't run away when you sent the maid with this dress for me," Phim says, arching an eyebrow, "then I'm not going to now."

"You look lovely though," I say.

"I'd prefer leather," she sourly replies, and we all laugh.

I look at Breelyn for her answer, and she smiles back at me. "I met you when I was running away, and it cost me

much, as you well know. I saw you, a female forced to her knees before an alpha, and knew in my heart we were kindred spirits. Neither of us are ever going to bow again.”

“Never,” I agree, my eyes filling with tears. Gods, I’m already crying.

Breelyn sneakily wipes her own eyes, and Phim doesn’t tease either of us for it.

The library seems to groan, the bookshelves sounding like they are moving in excitement. I smile at the room, at the castle, which is more alive than I ever knew, and sit down on one of the three cushions on the floor under the archway. Breelyn and Phim sit down on the other two, making a triangle shape, and I look down at the ribbons on the ground. Breelyn goes to pick one up, to bind her arm to me, and I shake my head.

“Let me,” I suggest. My power smoothly glides from my chest in green vines, picking up the ribbons. I take hold of Breelyn’s and Phim’s hands, and use my magic to wrap the silver ribbons tightly around our joined hands until it feels tight.

The ribbons glow silver, a bright light blasting into the room around us, and I see Dip’s eyes widen in wonder.

“May the gods watch us and honour our pack. We call upon the ancient bonds of friendship, love, and sisterhood in this ceremony. I am the alpha female of Fall Mountain Pack, and I wish to bind myself to Seraphim Fall and Breelyn Ravensword Fall in this ceremony. Do you both accept?”

“Yes,” they both say at the same time. I feel the connection instantly as silver swirls of magic spread around us, and I grit my teeth as the light makes the omega mark on us all. I can feel it being drawn on my hip. The mark isn’t very painful, but it’s like a light burning. Everything grows so brightly silver, and the wind seems to pick up around the room—in a room that should not have any breeze.

The pain stops the second the bells ring, the high-pitched sound echoing. Twice they ring out the sound before we hear

the bells outside. Silver petals fall from the ceiling, and I joyfully laugh as I look at my new omegas. I swear I hear the entire pack cheer in delight.

“I will protect you with my life, alpha female,” Breelyn tells me with a sharp nod.

“Together, we will be at your side whenever you need us,” Phim agrees. I feel their loyalty and love, and it brings tears to my eyes. They mean every word.

Phim struggles to lift up her corset to look at the mark, and I look too, once I figure out a way. A large silver moon makes up most of the mark, with a circle around it and tiny little wolves walking along the top of the circle. All of it is silver, and it seems to glow, even the little swirls that curl around her hip. Breelyn looks at her own, very similar to Phim’s. I lift mine to see the same, but mine has wolves all the way around the circle, and my swirls stretch all the way to my belly button, curling around it. The silver is a stark contrast against the black marks.

“The petals are so pretty!” Dip says, spinning around in them, and we all watch her as we stand up. She looks like a goddess herself, with all the petals falling upon her.

The alphas come into the library a little later, as we are all dancing around with Dip in the petals. Callahan and Niall are with my alphas, and all of them stop, wearing matching smiles.

I chuckle and pick up Dip as I head over to them. Ragnar is still looking behind me as he speaks. “I don’t think I’ve seen Phim and Breelyn smile so much.”

“This feels right. Like we are complete,” I happily say and smile at Dip, who yawns.

“How about we get you some food and some rest?” Henderson suggests, holding out his hands. She all but jumps to my mate and nods. “Will you make the sandwiches in bear shapes again?”

“I can make dragons. How about that?” Silas says, crossing his arms.

“Wolves are better, right, kid?” Ragnar questions.

“Why don’t you all make the sandwiches and let Dip choose the best?” I suggest.

“Good idea, Mai,” Dip agrees with a big smile. Niall chuckles low as they leave with Dip, Seraphim not far behind them, and Callahan stealing Breelyn away.

“She has them wrapped around her tiny finger,” Niall states. I completely agree, and it makes me very proud of her. I also love seeing my alphas with my daughter and how they might be one day with any children we could have together. I can almost imagine a little boy running around with their eyes, my cheeks and pout, and dark hair. Spending time with Dip has made me want more children, a castle full of them.

Valentine tugs me to him. “Unless you have somewhere to be, want to stay and ask the library for a book on the Levi?”

“We will stay,” I agree. It was always the plan to come here and ask, and there is no better time than the present. The library might outright ignore me, but we need more information about them.

“I’m going to train with my army,” Niall says, patting my shoulder.

“See you soon,” I tell him as he leaves, and he waves a hand.

Valentine and I go deeper into the library until it’s darker, and it feels...well, more like the library down here. “It feels really strange to ask you for things once again, but thank you for the book on fairy tales for my daughter. It was exactly what we needed to bond, and I suspect you know it. Thank you for setting up the ceremony, that was beautiful. I already owe you big time for that, but is there any chance you know anything about the Levi and why they’re here? Anything at all could help us.”

I’m about to give up waiting after ten minutes goes by in silence, and Valentine looks down at me, parting his lips to no doubt say the same thing when I hear a little wisp of wind in my ears, and a book thumps to my feet. I look down and pick

up the book, feeling relieved. “Thank you!” It’s an old brown leatherbound book that’s aged over time, and the crisp pages have turned yellow.

I nod to Valentine, and we head down the stacks of the library until we come to a little wooden table with two chairs pushed into it, and a dim yellow table lamp hangs off the bookshelf above it. I remember this place vividly because last time we were here, Valentine made me come so hard that I saw stars, and I’m pretty sure he enjoyed himself here too.

I like being here with Valentine. He’s so big and bulky he seems to fill the small space up as he sits down on one of the chairs, and I sit on the other, watching my handsome mate. His dark hair is silky and falls just down past his ears, and his short beard only makes him sexier. He looks up and arches an eyebrow.

My cheeks burn as I look down, and I enjoy his dark, amused huff. Damn sexy mates. I open the book and start reading it the best I can. Most of it is paintings, and what is in writing is in the old language of the gods. It takes my mind a few attempts to guess at words and, to my surprise, Valentine helps me by reading some of them here and there. The first ten pages are about the author and his life, and none of it is useful or about the Levi at all. I’m starting to wonder if the library is playing a joke on us when the author writes about the gods talking to him.

“Do you think he went mad? He sounds crazy at this point,” I say to Valentine.

He hums in agreement. We carry on reading, which turns into rambling more than any solid sentences. The author says the Levi are punishments from the old gods.

“I believe he means from the Wolven gods, Mai,” Valentine suggests. I agree.

“The Levi are here until the balance is reset,” I say out loud, reading the last real sentence of the book. Everything else is unreadable scribbles until there are simply blank pages left with old blood dotted on them.

“I suspect the unnamed author met with a bad ending,” Valentine says, closing the book. It instantly disappears in a flash of light.

Valentine picks up my hand off the table, and he starts running circles around my palm, comforting me. “We will figure it out.”

“I believe we are just missing something. I wish my mum was here so I could ask her about the Wolven gods,” I say with a sigh.

“I’d have loved to see her again, too. Did I ever tell you she got all of us to come to your house one time when you weren’t there?” he tells me, his lips tilting up. “It wasn’t long after our first kiss, and I’m sure she scented something, or she just knew.”

My eyes widen. Even now, I feel a little embarrassed, but he carries on. “She made us drinks and then sat at the head of the table with such a fierce look on her face. Your mum made it clear if we hurt you, then she would tell our mum and they’d both make our lives hell. They’d agreed on it beforehand.”

I chuckle. “I can’t even imagine her doing that. You are alphas!”

“But she was your mum and damn scary to a kid,” he replies with a cool laugh. “I told her you were our family, our female, and one day you’d be our mate. We had decided it.”

“You had, huh?” I say with a smile, and he winks at me. “What did she reply?”

He laughs. “That we’d be very damn lucky if you would put up with us all. She was right.”

“I’m the lucky one,” I say softly, climbing out of my seat. I walk around the table and step in between Valentine’s open legs.

I kiss his jaw ever so tenderly, enjoying the swift change in his scent. I kiss my way to his soft lips, which part under the pressure of my own. He lets me control the kiss for all of a second before he takes over, deepening the kiss and picking me up in his arms. He pushes me against the bookcase on the

other side, shaking it hard, and books fall down, but neither of us notice.

He bunches my skirt up, feeling that I'm bare underneath, and he gives me a dirty grin. "Naughty wolf."

His words send a buzz through me as he lowers himself to his knees. I arch my back as he holds me in place against the bookcase and presses one kiss on the inside of my thigh as he puts my legs on his large shoulders.

Then he devours me in the way only a wolf can. I cry out, slamming my hand over my mouth at the first lick of his hot tongue. He sucks, nips, and licks my clit until I'm shaking with the need to come.

Ragnar steps in behind Valentine, his eyes on me. If Valentine knows he is there, he doesn't stop. He speeds up. I cry out, coming hard as Valentine sticks his tongue within me to feel it. Ragnar's eyes burn with lust as Valentine lowers me and undoes his belt, and I stand in a bit of a daze.

He looks at Ragnar. "Watching or playing?"

"Bit of both," he replies, rubbing his hand across his hard length in his trousers. I tighten around nothing.

Valentine cups my jaw and kisses me, forcing me to taste myself on him. Gods, I actually like it. "You're mine first."

"Am I?" I tease, running my hand over his hard cock and stroking him once. "There seems to be a lot of talking and not ___"

I squeal as he lifts me in the air, carrying me to the table and bending me over it face first. I barely get a chance to hold on to the edges before he thrusts into me and groans, a masculine groan of pleasure. I sigh at the feeling of him, how full he makes me and how my body all but purrs for him. He thrusts into me again, hard enough to shake the table. I lose track of time, of anything but his thrusts as he fucks me hard. We both chase our pleasure, and Ragnar steps in front of me. He unzips his trousers and looks at me, a silent question. We haven't done this before, but I'm a fast learner.

I stroke his cock into my mouth, and Valentine digs his fingers into my ass as he fucks me hard from behind. The motion easily glides me up and down Ragnar's cock, not all the way as he is too big, but from the groan Ragnar gives, I assume it's enough. I don't care anyway, not when I'm this close to coming. Valentine growls, getting faster, and I know he is close, too.

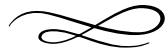
"Come over my cock. Squeeze me with your tight pussy, Mai," Valentine commands, and by the gods, I do. Pure pleasure locks up my spine, and Valentine comes hard in me, his hand digging into my ass. Ragnar grunts seconds later, pulling out of my mouth and coming on the floor with a long groan.

I breathlessly lie down as Valentine pulls out of me and picks me up, sweetly holding me as he sits down on the ground. We all take a second to get our breath back, and when I look to my left, there is a bucket and clothes. The library is kinky...I'm not sure if I like it.

Either way, we have to do that again.

Valentine's and Ragnar's deep chuckles fill my mind until Valentine speaks. "Oh, my sweet mate, we will."

Ten



THERE ARE SO many strikingly bright colours when I open my eyes that it's like looking at a million butterflies spinning around a room of gold. It takes me a second to adjust to everything to realise that the colours are ball gowns, silky dresses, and spheres of lights hovering across the beautiful ballroom above the dancers. The floor is made of pure gold under my feet, and the domed room has massive arched windows that overlook nothing but clouds outside. We must be high up. People dance effortlessly, beautifully, along with music that I have never heard before. I don't think I've heard anything played so unforgettably addictive. I feel like I'm lucky to be remembering this part of the past, to even be seeing it.

My eyes cast straight across the room to Hades and Persephone as they dance around in the centre, so many eyes on them. The others are pretending to dance, but their gazes give them away. I can see why they are staring. Even in a room full of gods, they stand out like stars. Persephone's wearing a beautiful black dress with thousands of tiny silver stars in the lace. She looks like a galaxy, spinning around in time. They are the only couple wearing black in the entire room, for the other males are in white suits, their females in colours, but Hades is completely in black. His tuxedo has a black tie and shiny dark shoes that suit his dark hair. Persephone's own black dress is a complete mimic to his, like they were made for each other. The gown spins as Hades twists her to the music, and they move together like they were created for each other.

Soul mates.

It's how I feel with my alphas. I truly believe that our souls choose our mate way before we are ever born. She really is a jewel in this crowd, and it's hard not to stare at them both. I watch Hades, feeling how familiar he is, a dark shadow to my mates' souls. I have a feeling most of the people in here are gods, because they are all beautiful, enchantingly so, and there is something about them that makes me feel like I've seen them before. A few of them I recognise from the statues in my home.

Shifters and angels are beautiful, designed to lure people in, but gods...they don't have to lure anyone. Mortals would just fall to their feet and pray for a second look. Maybe my alphas are like this. Maybe we all are. An extremely handsome gold-haired male stands upon the grandstand at the front, the orchestra behind him. He places his hands in the pockets of his white jacket, and lightning flashes across a cloud-filled sky outside, turning everyone silent, and the music cuts out instantly. It takes me a second to really look at the people playing in the orchestra and how they are frozen in place, their eyes empty of life. I gulp at the disgust filling my throat.

It's easy to forget what the gods are when faced with their beauty, but when faced with their actions, I can see nothing but death. They are death, each of them. The male holds his hand out, and a gold spinning object appears, floating above his hand. It's made of metal rings, all of them connected together but spinning continuously. They are shining bright gold and green light into the room.

Everyone in the room goes deadly silent.

"Welcome, fellow gods. It has been too long since we have gathered...even if not all of us are here," he states, his voice echoing. He is Zeus, I realise, putting everything together. I hear some snorts in the crowd and murmurs of him being a murderer of gods, and that's why they don't gather. Some claim he is mad. All of them go silent when he carries on speaking. "I'm glad you all decided to accept my invitation. I'm sure, as are you all, that you know what this is."

The crowd stirs. “The famous Apple of Discord. This will give us the power to be immortal without the Wolven gods’ control over us. This is our freedom. I will lead us all to freedom. Who’s going to be brave enough to come up and receive this gift? I have already freed myself.”

No one moves. Everyone is completely and utterly silent until a bewitching woman steps out of the crowd. She has long, beautiful black hair that hits the floor, and everything about her is smooth, curvy, and stunning. I recognise her from the statues. This is Peitho, the goddess that was bound to Adira’s soul. Even though she isn’t Adira, she certainly carries herself in the same way and gives off the same feeling. Her dress, which isn’t much fabric at all, is a dark purple colour and wrapped around her to barely cover her breasts and below her waist. As she steps in front of Zeus, she looks over at Hades for a second. They were lovers once, before he met Persephone. And Persephone knows it. She sneers at Peitho, who sharply looks away. Hades doesn’t even acknowledge her. Zeus kisses her softly on the cheek, his eyes watching Hades before taking her hand and putting it on the apple before she can say a word.

She glows a mixture of gold and forest green for a second before she steps to his side. I don’t notice any kind of change. Maybe it’s something only they feel, but a ripple seems to go through the crowd.

“We will be next,” Hades commands, his deep voice cutting through the crowd like smoke. Shadows wrap around every step he takes through the crowd, Persephone at his side until they come right up to the Apple of Discord and stand in front of Zeus. He is smart enough not to kiss Persephone on the cheek. I’m certain Hades would kill him for it. Hades nods to his mate. They both share a look. Zeus is looking at her too, the affection he feels written on his face and the lust too. She barely notices him either; for her and Hades, they might as well be alone. This must be when they got free from the Wolven gods, like they planned. Part of me feels sorry for them, bound to someone else when they want to be free.

They join hands and place both their hands on the apple at the same time. The gold and green light floods over them, and they both smile wildly at each other like it's solved all their problems before stepping to the side. Just as one of the other gods starts to walk forward, the ground shakes hard, knocking them all over to their knees. There's barely a scream before all the gods on the dance floor are wiped away in a blast of green light that leaves nothing but dust in its wake. I stand still in the middle of the dust as Hades and Persephone stand, Peitho and Zeus next.

Their eyes widen, but it's Persephone who I look at. The look of pure horror on her face as she looks at her mate, her love, and realises that they just made a terrible, terrible mistake.

I wake up slowly, blinking my eyes to see Henderson's face right in front of me. He is fast asleep, so peaceful and handsome. I sigh. I lightly run my fingers down his cheek, careful not to wake him up, feeling warm sunlight on my back. Or it might be Silas I'm feeling. I'm pretty sure it is Silas, as something hard pokes into my backside. I would have thought he had enough of me last night with all of them, but even though I'm a little sore, I don't doubt they would be ready to start over if I said the word.

We can't get enough of each other. I don't think I ever will do.

Valentine is on the other side of Henderson, his light snores echoing around the room. Ragnar is on the other side of Silas, his foot touching mine. I roll over onto my back and look up at the ceiling. This ceiling has been painted like an aquamarine ocean wave brushing across the dusty yellow sand. It's gentle and peaceful, little starfish and footprints on the sand. Peace. It feels so far away, because even now in this silence, I can feel my pack waking up with the sun and saying goodbye to their loved ones, sending them into the middle of the pack or to the castle. Last night was our time to say goodbye and promise we will see each other again. One way or another, no matter how tomorrow ends.

“Morning,” Henderson grumbles, tugging me closer and resting his head on my bare chest. I stroke his hair softly.

“Morning to you,” I breathe out. Silas, Valentine and Ragnar slowly wake, all of us tired from not enough sleep. It was sleep or sex, and I can’t say any of us were responsible last night when we chose sex.

Twice.

Okay, three times.

I smile, the memories flickering across my mind. I doubt any of us could have slept anyway, with how worried we are about today. Our pack wolves are going to die. There is no way to avoid it, but we are definitely going to take as many angels and Levi down as possible. Cenwyn has no idea what is going to hit him. I show my alphas the dream, showing them everything that I saw with Hades and Persephone. They’ve seen every dream like I have, but none of us knows what exactly we’re being told, other than the fact that they made a big mistake unbinding themselves from the Wolven gods.

“Mai, I don’t have any answers for you other than I liked Hades’s suit,” Henderson says, sitting up.

“I liked her dress,” I smile just as there are three sharp knocks at the door. Silas groans and buries his head under the pillow in response. Ragnar is already sitting up, drinking a glass of water, and Valentine is grumbling as he goes to the bathroom, making it clear he isn’t getting the door. I roll my eyes at them all, climb out next, and pull a spare blanket off the floor, wrapping it around me. As Henderson pulls on some trousers, the door is knocked again, and I quickly go to it, peeping my head around the door as I open it.

I’m surprised to see Breelyn there. I’m more surprised to see her in a beautiful crystal white dress that hits the floor and is strapless. There are crystal beads in her hair to make a headband with some braids, and the rest fall down her back. She looks absolutely beautiful.

“Fighting in a dress isn’t something I’d recommend. I did the last rite test in one, and it was just annoying, but it was a

tradition,” I point out, and she laughs.

“I did think you were mad to wear a dress,” she says, arching an eyebrow. “But I’m definitely not ready for the fight. Callahan and I decided last night that we want to become mates before the battle. I know we don’t have a lot of time, but it would mean the world to us if you five would attend and one of you do the priest’s job.”

I nod with a big smile. “There is always time for some happiness. Of course we will be there, but it will have to be like right now.”

“Congratulations,” Henderson says, stepping behind me in nothing but trousers. “We have half an hour. Do Seraphim, Trey, Jesper, Niall and Dip know?”

She shakes her head. “They are already in the safe room, and Phim said she can’t deal with romantic shit when she has kids to convince to stay in the room. Niall and Deimos are already with their men, giving speeches about today’s battle. Really, I just want you four there. I understand why Phim might not want to see a mating ceremony.”

We all do. After her past with matings, it might be too much for her. Plus, I’m sure she has her hands full with the kids.

“Where are we going, then?” I question, an excited thrill spreading through me. I thought they would mate soon, and truthfully, it’s a long time coming, and I can’t wait to see my best friends mated. They are soul mates.

“On the balcony that looks over the waterfall by the library,” she tells me. I wonder why she chose that place.

“Okay, I’m going to get dressed and be there quickly,” I tell her.

She inclines her head, a joyful smile on her face. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Breelyn this happy. I shut the door after she walks away and look around to see Henderson is already putting on his leathers for battle. Valentine comes out of the bathroom, fully dressed for battle, and clips on some knives to

his thick thighs. Silas finally gets out of bed and heads to the bathroom, stomping the entire way.

Ragnar uses the other bathroom, and I go in after him, both of us getting ready together. Ragnar helps me braid my hair and clip it into a tight bun so it's not in the way. My leather clothes have been changed a little so I can carry the seven on me into battle. There is space for the sword, arrow, and dagger on my hips.

Ragnar pulls out a dagger from his pile. It's a delicate double-bladed dagger with a gold handle in the middle and tiny diamonds making a moon shape in the centre of the handle. "When I was a kid, mum gave me this. It was the only thing she had from our biological father who ran out on us. Mum said she gave Henderson something else, but this was mine, and I never once knew what to do with it. I left it here when we went to search for you, and now I look at it...I want to remember it as a gift from my mum not him. Take it, and I hope mum is with us today. I want her to protect you if she is."

I take the dagger and kiss his cheek. "For the record, your biological father was an idiot."

He laughs. "Now we know where Hens gets it from."

"I heard that, prick!" Henderson shouts from the other room. "And why did you get a fancy dagger and I got a pen!"

"Eavesdropping is fucking rude!" Ragnar shouts back. "And I've always been the favourite."

I laugh at them both and clip the dagger into my belt where there is space. After we all dress, we head straight to the balcony where Callahan and Breelyn are already waiting, her hand in his, and he is dressed in his black armour with the Fall Mountain Pack symbol on his chest. Callahan looks proud, but I suspect it's a lot to do with Breelyn, and that's so sweet.

"Morning," I say with a smile.

"Alphas and alpha female," Callahan replies.

I hit his shoulder before hugging him. "Congratulations, my friend. You both deserve this."

I hug Breelyn next, and she whispers softly to me, “My dad told me I should always wear white when I decide to marry the male that I’m in love with. I didn’t wear white at my forced mating, and he knew. We both knew. I wish he was here, but I know he’s watching down on me and Callahan, and I know he would have loved him as a son. He might not be here, but you are, and you are my family, Mai.”

I nod slightly at her. “You’re my family too. Both of you.”

I’ll never forget that I took her father’s life, that I was forced to, but his sacrifice saved her life, and I would never have gotten to know what a brave, beautiful and strong wolf she is without that terrible day. He will not be forgotten.

“Would you let me do this ceremony?” Valentine asks, stepping forward, surprising us all. I didn’t think he’d volunteer.

“It would be a great honour,” Callahan agrees, and Breelyn shyly nods. They stand in front of the waterfall in front of Valentine, and I help Valentine tie black ribbons around their joined hands before stepping back.

I can’t stop the tears in my eyes as Valentine starts. Callahan and Breelyn might as well be alone as they stare at each other, a million loving, joyful, and beautiful feelings crossing the distance.

“May the gods bless this union and watch over the mating of these two souls,” Valentine says, his voice echoing. “I call upon the old and new gods to bless this couple and to join them in magic.”

The ribbons tighten on their own, and silver symbols appear all over the black ribbon. “Please say your vows.”

“I, Callahan Fall, promise my soul to yours. May all the gods watch down on us,” he says, and Breelyn’s cheeks are wet with tears. She says the same with her name.

The space seems to pause, and a bright light shines around the couple before the ribbons burn away. The second the last part of the ribbon is gone, Callahan grabs his mate and kisses her deeply.

I wipe my cheeks, and Silas places his hand on my back. Valentine walks over and softly smiles at me. “I hope there are many matings when this war is over.”

I chuckle through my tears. “Not too many, or I’ll end up an emotional mess.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt this beautiful ceremony,” Silas says, but I suspect he is bored with this now. Callahan glowers at him after pulling away from his mate. “But you are both needed as betas. Today we go to war.”

Callahan and Breelyn look at each other before back to us. “To war.”

“We will survive this,” I firmly say.

But none of us can do anything about the nervous tension in the pack, in the very air around us.

None of us say a word because we can’t promise each other anything. I look at my mates, wanting to be alone with them just a second longer before we have to fight.

“For our mates,” Ragnar says into the silence.

Callahan looks up at us. “For our mates. For our pack. For a future.”

He and Breelyn leave quickly to make the most of the short time they have and to get dressed after, I suspect. I feel Breelyn’s eyes on me as she walks away, and I nod to her, telling her to go and enjoy her new mate. They will be fighting at my side today, in the battle, and there is no one else I would trust to have my back. Maybe Seraphim, but my sister is needed elsewhere. I couldn’t leave the castle at all if I didn’t know she was here to protect Serendipity.

I wish I’d held my daughter one more time last night. Kissed her cheek one more time. Read her one more story.

“No matter where we run, we will find each other again,” Henderson says down our bond to us all. The words we have said so many times to each other, the words that bring us back together time and time again, no matter what the world throws our way.

“I’ll be there fighting at your side until the end,” I tell them out loud. My alphas move to stand around me, their heads bowed to touch mine, and I just embrace their scent, their heat, their comfort.

I send a message, not only to my mates but to our entire pack. Making sure every single wolf hears it, young or old. “We endure the fall and rise in the ashes. Fall Mountain Pack does not surrender, but we bite back.”

“We rise,” our pack echoes back to us, and I swear our wolves feel stronger as the two words repeat.

Silas kisses my cheek. “By the way, I love you. I will always love you. Always have done no matter what the day brings.”

“We all echo that,” Ragnar whispers to me, kissing my lips. Henderson kisses my other cheek, and Valentine pulls me to the side, kissing me much deeper than Ragnar did, until my toes curl. His chest vibrates with a growl at my scent, and I force myself to step back, out of his arms.

My cheeks are still warm. “You all are my soul mates, and we will fight him. We will defeat him. Now go and get our wolves ready, alphas.”

They each say goodbye before leaving, and I can feel how much they want to turn back and hold me through this entire war. But we can’t do that, our pack needs us. We have to lead by example and show them we will fight at their side.

“I love you and will be with you soon after I get the seven,” I whisper to them as I turn the opposite way and head to the secret room. Five guards trail after me, out of the shadows the alphas hid them in, and I smile at my overprotective alphas. Walking quickly, I go straight into the room with the seven and tell my guards to wait outside. The fewer wolves around these weapons, the better. Who knows if one of them might fall for the lure? They don’t need to be in here.

All of them are glowing, the light throbbing like it has a pulse. I barely step into the circle before a blast of magic

crashes out around me. It doesn't hit me, but it spreads across my body like elastic that I can't feel before spreading behind me. It makes a shield all over the area, white and bright. Green magic, shaped like water droplets, falls like rain down from the centre and into the middle of the seven weapons. Out of that green magic, an outline of a female appears until there are seven beautiful ghost-like women standing in a circle, their hands all connected. They each wear the same dress, but even like this, I can see they are all very pretty and from different backgrounds. Maybe similar ages, though. They are all young. My eyes widen as I realise who I'm looking at. They are The Seven female sacrifices, the souls within the weapons. Their voices seem to speak into my mind, but their mouths move at exactly the same time.

“Every god was born a mortal,” they whisper, their joined voice so sweet and childlike. It reminds me of Dip, and I wonder if they use that voice to make me trust them. Gods were mortals? “They were unusually perfect mortals, favoured and loved by their families and villages. The Wolven gods decided to bless and give beautiful powers to the mortals to help save their families, their villages, and towns. The mortals were dying, and there wasn't enough magic in the world to help save them on their own. The new gods had powers of healing, powers of death, weather, of growth and fertility, and so much more. All powers that could push humankind to a different level, to make mortals so much more than they could be on their own. To help. They were created to guide mortals, but they were always owned by the Wolven gods. They were told their magic and lives would be taken back whenever the Wolven gods chose, whenever they felt their task was done with the mortals.”

She pauses and a soft breeze floats around the room, bringing with it the sweet scent of sugar as I try to process everything they are telling me. “What are the Wolven gods?”

“They are time. They are fate. They are destiny. They are magic shifter energy and the many, many millions of words that have been used to explain them. Their true name could not be spoken by god nor mortal,” they reply together. I walk closer, the light shining upon me. “The only thing they did not

have was the long-sightedness of what they created. The Wolven gods wrongly assumed the gods they'd created like children would always be happy under their rule and would never rebel and wish to create their own fate. But they did, and there was a price."

"I saw this. The Apple of Discord freed some of them, and the Wolven gods killed the rest," I say.

"The Wolven gods interfered, but that wasn't the price," she replies. "Only they may speak the price."

"How do I find them?"

"The Wolven gods wanted to make sure that the gods left did not harm the balance of the world, so they blessed five families. Five mortal families with the power to contact them, to be a direct link between our worlds and, in return, they will be kept safe and blessed. They do not live in our world, but they touch our world now and then. This connection can be found in the bloodlines of those descendants from such a long time ago."

"Why are you here telling me all this?" I ask.

"When the seven are all together, our power is strong enough to push into this world from our mortal bound objects. We are created the same. We are the same."

There is so much sadness in the voice. "I'm sorry."

"Be sorry for those who are bound to life but not living," she breathes out into the room. "We are helping you because we know there is a chance for our own freedom. When we were created, the first of us, Morganis, was dying. This was her last chance, but not for us. The rest of us, it was not that simple. We were not virgins or unhappy or dying. We were owned by our gods, yes, but we liked life. We were forced into these mortal bound objects and used. We know you understand what it is like to be trapped and used by those that should protect you, Mairin."

I do.

"As time went on, when we were lost from the gods, we were abused and used by mortals until we lashed out at

mortals, wolves and angels alike in our anger and hate. We took their souls, their emotions, so we could feel alive. We lure those strong souls to us even now, just to feel mortal emotions.”

The lust for emotions, for feelings, makes me feel uncomfortable as much as I feel sorry for them. They aren’t good or evil, but a mixture of both.

“We have never been freed, all these years, just like them. Their curse is ours. We cannot be free until all the gods are gone, their magic left only to mortals to carry on in their bloodline, as it should be.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“We help because you are that chance. You were born as a blessing to the world, chosen by the Wolven gods. The chosen of them, not the moon goddess. Three fallen stars. Three names. One blessing from each of the Wolven gods. Our chance at freedom lies within you because you are one of the last of the line of descendants from the families the Wolven gods blessed. Only you can contact them. The firstborn can, just like your mother did.

“Mum?” I whisper.

“She asked them so many times for you to be kept safe. I listened. I was at her side, her friend. I was always there, even as I took her life in another’s hands and felt grief for the first time in a thousand years,” they say.

“Chaitala?” I question.

“You’re speaking to all of us at once. We share our memories, and we will help you in this battle to come. We will fight for you. But when the time comes, when Persephone comes, when there is a chance, you must take it.”

“I don’t know what you need me to do,” I say. “And I have a war to fight. I can’t be running errands for you right now.”

“You need me to contact the Wolven gods...,” they command. “You must pay whatever price they demand, or the world will fall.”

They all disappear, along with the magic, until there is nothing but fog lining the surrounding ground. I search my bond for my mates and show them what happened as I grab the seven and clip them to me until only the book is left. My mates are taking in everything as I flip the pages open.

“You want to help me, show me a spell to call the Wolven gods,” I demand.

The pages burst into silver lights, and as it dims, there is a simple spell written in the centre of the page. Under it is a warning to make an altar with a blood gift.

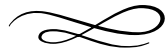
“Do you want us to come back?” Valentine questions as I close the book. I look over at the corridor where all my guards are passed out, likely from the seven’s magic. I hate to leave them down here, but I don’t have time to wait until they wake up.

“No need, but I need to stay here and make an altar. I remember what they look like from when I was a kid,” I tell them through the bond. “When I’m done, I’ll be there.”

“Be careful. Callahan and Breelyn are on their way,” Silas says before he leaves. They all do, and I hear the bells of war ring out across the city. The shield will hold, and no one will get in. We will go to them and fight for our pack, leaving the safety of our city, so that our people who can’t fight can survive.

We fight for Fall Mountain Pack on this day.

Eleven



“**MAI**, this was a long time ago. I can hardly remember what the altar looked like,” Niall says, feeling as frustrated as I am.

“I think it’s right,” I tell him, looking down at the altar I’ve made in the freshly cut grass. Four goat bones are stuck in the ground right behind a massive flat river stone that I’ve pushed into the ground of a tiny garden on the fourth floor of the castle. No one uses this place, and the cooks told me about it when I went to them for the bones. They also told Niall where to get a big river stone without going too far. I can feel the wind whipping around me, pushing against my leather clothes, and it’s still freezing enough to make my fingertips numb. The flowery scent wraps around me as I look down at the circle of salt around the entire altar. This is kind of how I remember my mum used to do it. I pick up ten candles and light them, sticking them on top of the stone with a bit of melted wax at the end. “We just need the blood sacrifice.”

I look in the skies for Callahan, who went hunting in the forest for an animal to kill. I didn’t think it was a good idea to use any of the frozen animals in the kitchen. The Wolven gods might see that as offensive when they want a blood sacrifice. However, they might not like that I’m sacrificing an animal instead of us using our blood.

But blood has power and links souls, and I’m not risking the kind of connection it could give to those gods. Breelyn is pacing up and down in front of my five guards, who woke up and found me in the kitchen. We all start watching the sky as I

try not to worry too much. I begin to pace like Breelyn the moment I think about my alphas. They are fighting for our pack out there, using their magic, and it is working. As far as I know, Cenwyn hasn't come forward, and he is letting his men be slaughtered before he attacks.

It's a game, and the bastard knows it. What is he waiting for?

Effortlessly, I search the bond for my mates and find Silas first. He sends me some images, flashes across my mind, and I see he's standing with the archers, thousands of them lining every rooftop near the border of the city. Angels line the skies behind them, waiting.

Just the army outside. Silas isn't the first team to go out. They are to shoot anything in the sky as the others fight on the ground. Waves of our wolves jump out of the shield, following my alphas into battle. Black against red, wave against wave. It's horrible, the images Silas sends me, but I want to see them. I need to be witness to the destruction being caused.

It only feeds my anger for Cenwyn.

I can't help the fear that creeps into my heart and soul at seeing my mates fighting, killing, and destroying angels and Levi left, right and centre. Thankfully, they are easily cutting through anything in their path. So are our wolves. Silas's army is quick at shooting the angels out of the air, and the wolves are right there to bite into them as they fall. Our army is fast and strong, and we have hundreds of thousands beside us today. We won't lose as long as the shield holds and we can slowly attack, day after day until the angels flee and only the Levi are left.

We are playing the long game.

I have to remember that.

I know that every weapon has been covered with wolf venom, giving us the edge that Cenwyn doesn't have. The Levi are the real threat. Mindless, strong animals that they are. The thought of them scares me down to my core. They aren't easy to beat, and there are so many of them out there. One

scratch, and my wolves are dead or worse. The armour and thick skin of their wolf forms should help make sure the scratches don't hit deep. The angels and wolves who are not shifting have their armour, but I worry it's not enough.

I pull back out of the mate bond as Callahan lands next to me, dropping a dead fox at my feet. "It will do. Thanks," I say and look at him. "You need to go to the front. I want as few people as possible here."

Callahan immediately starts to disagree as Breelyn walks over to us. "The alphas commanded—"

"I'm your alpha female too," I say softly. "And I'm telling you to go and fight for our pack. I'm about to summon powerful gods. Who knows how they're going to react. I don't even want Niall to be here, but we both know he won't leave."

"Correct," Niall agrees, and I glare at him for a second.

"Mai, what if you need to fight? What if somehow an angel gets here?" Breelyn questions.

"Then they will meet with me," Niall retorts. "And truthfully, they should be scared of her."

"They should," I reply with a cool smile. "I will destroy anyone who comes here to hurt me."

They look at each other, and faced with my stubbornness, they give in. Breelyn comes to me, takes my hands in hers. "Be careful. Call for us, and we'll be back."

"I know you will, and be careful yourself," I tell her. "I want us to have a real party to celebrate our matings when this is over."

"I might even wear another dress," she replies with a grin.

"If this all goes wrong, I do love you. Both of you," I tell her and Callahan. "I want you to be Dip's wolf guardians. If you will be."

"It would be an honour," Callahan says with wide eyes. Wolf guardians are like godparents for humans, but I think we had the tradition first, and they copied it into their own religions. Or that's the story Ravensword taught us as kids.

“We will protect her as family. Just like you and the alphas are to us,” she says. “And Phim of course.”

“Go,” I tell her softly. “For Fall Mountain Pack.”

“For our alphas,” Callahan replies with a low bow. He picks up Breelyn and shoots off into the sky.

I mentally command the guards to leave and join the protection of the castle outside. They leave at my order.

I glance at Niall as I kneel down in front of the altar. “Last chance to leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Maiy,” he replies. “But I’m not going to lie and say this doesn’t freak me out as much as it did when your mama did it.”

I pick up the dead fox and place it on the altar behind the bones, within the circle. This looks just like my mother used to do, but she always used a lamb. I lay the book of the seven down and read the spell once before leaving it on the edge of the circle. I keep the other weapons strapped to me, though, because I have no idea what I’m about to go into.

With one more look at Niall, I begin to read the spell. The old words, written in an old tongue that feels like it should never be spoken, echo from the back of my throat. I remember them...my mum made me say them when I was kid. She gave me everything I ever needed. I repeat them again and again as the wind picks up around us, an unnatural wind, and I see Niall hold his hands out against it, shouting as he is pushed away.

“MAI!” he hollers, but he is pushed too far and the wind is too fast for me to even see through it.

A sudden darkness slams down on me, crushing me to the cold floor. Every bone in my body aches like a train hit me as I try to stand up, my legs shaky. Everything is pitch black, but I’m still able to see a circle of light around me, but not what makes the light. Maybe the light is coming from me. I’m no longer standing on a rooftop with flowers under my feet. I’m now just standing in what looks like a massive black puddle. I

step forward, but my steps make no ripples in the water that stays still. It's completely silent.

I'm not alone.

A low growl fills my ears, and I turn around, my eyes widening as three gigantic wolves step out of the darkness. My body shakes in fear and dread, and I feel like I'm barely breathing as I take them in.

The Wolven gods.

Their coats are white, whiter than any snow or colour could be. They are spotless, shining, and their eyes are like hollow black stars. One of their bared fore-teeth is the size of my head, and they are just as terrifying as I'd imagined them. But worse. I feel myself wanting to run away or bow or cry in their presence, but I'm not sure which. It's a mixture of all of them.

I can't feel my bond here. I can't feel anything but fear as I stare at these gods, and one word fills my mind.

“Bow.”

Now I do as I'm told, falling to my knees immediately and knowing, if I didn't, I'd be dead. They don't care for me or mortal things. The power of their word drums through my ears, echoing over and over. They are so powerful, so overwhelming. I feel like I can't breathe in their presence, and it's hard to even look at them. They are wolves. The Wolven gods are wolves. Of course they are.

I bow my head low and don't dare move until they stop and it's been silent for a while. “Mairin Elysia Astra Fall. Alpha female and queen of Fall Mountain Pack. Queen of the shifters. Rejected wolf. The falling queen. So many names for one so young.”

I still stay silent, words on the tip of my tongue, but it feels impossible to speak them.

“You dare to bring those unholy, mortal bound objects before us?” another one of them questions.

A deadly question.

Their voices are old, older than time, but their threat is all the same, no matter the time. “The weapons, the seven, led me to you. They told me how to call you because you blessed my ancestral line with that power, to watch over the mortals. I’m here because the mortals, the shifters and the world are in danger.”

“We well know what state the world is in,” another one of them responds.

A male hum fills the air. “We blessed both your lines, your mother’s and your father’s, with this gift. It drove your father mad, and he killed himself looking for the seven after we commanded he find them.”

He pauses as a deep shock settles into my chest, but not sorrow, because he might have been my biological father, but he wasn’t my dad. I didn’t know him. “We wanted them destroyed. We wanted them gone from the mortal world, along with any trace of their existence. They were weapons created by our children with our stolen magic, and they should not have existed in the first place. Every drop of magic has a price.”

“And what was the price of the Apple of Discord?”

“Death,” the word echoes. “The Apple of Discord is a very powerful object, made of our magic, but only a tiny part. It bears a certain price. The gods freed themselves from us, from our control over them, only to create something that, in turn, cursed them. Every time they put one of the seven into the waters to make the weapons, their souls were latched onto the weapons through that magic. We dug our claws in and took our price. We might not have had control over them until they died, but we would wait.”

“Time is nothing,” another replies, sounding bored.

“We chose to make a punishment that would stretch forever. The gods who touched the apple would be bound to mortals. So they can never be at peace and never be with each other again. For a certain two, this was not an ending they wished for.”

“They deserve this,” another one breathes out, pleasure in his voice.

I don’t think anyone deserves that. I think it in my mind, but when a deep growl echoes around me, I wonder if they can hear my thoughts.

“We are gods,” one of them coldly states. “You are not here to judge us.”

Bone snapping pain bursts down my spine like someone sticking a thousand needles into it. I scream and fall into the puddle of water, tasting the salt in my mouth, writhing in pain before they suddenly let me go.

I gasp for air, sucking it in.

Not daring to think a thing except wishing to see my mates. Wanting them here.

There is silence for a long time, long enough I manage to stand and wipe away blood that is pouring from my ears. My back hurts something terrible. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to question your choice.”

They watch me with an unnerving gaze.

“I apologise,” I say out loud. “I didn’t summon you to insult you.”

“What do you want, mortal wolf queen?”

Straight to the point. “What are the Levi, and how do I get rid of them? A lot of them at once? Is it a spell?”

“No spell,” they smoothly reply. “They are a curse. A punishment. Magic is complicated and old and twisted. It punishes and breaks whatever it wishes if not used correctly. We are magic, but we do not control all of it, because it is alive on its own. The seven were created with the apple, a price made, but one was not. There was one who cast her own dark spells on her soul, on magic and made sure she would be bound to a mortal object, just like the others, so she could survive her own death and be reborn. Medea, the witch goddess who should have died. Erin.”

“Medea,” I whisper her name.

“Yes, that was her name then, and I believe it is Erin now. She was a peculiar goddess, years ahead of herself and a witch more than a goddess, thanks to her upbringing. But what she did was unholy, against the rules of magic, and there had to be a price paid. The Levi were that price. As long as Medea’s soul is still alive and bound to the mortal girl, the Levi will survive too. The price.”

A cold, bottomless pit opens in my stomach, and I place my hands on it to hold myself up. “Are you saying to kill all the Levi and get rid of them...Erin has to die?”

“You know the answer is yes. You’ve suspected the link for a long time, and you remember, even now, the words of Demeter. She said Erin wasn’t long in this world.” They tell me everything I’m thinking before I’ve even thought it.

“She is owed to death. Erin was not meant to be in this world,” they tell me. “She must die if you wish to save your pack and have a future at all.”

“We cannot give you any more information, young mortal wolf queen, but we do thank you for your gift. You finished the mission that killed your father in the end,” the wolf says.

“What?” I whisper, still in a trance of shock about Erin.

“You brought us the seven, and we can take our power back that the gods created them with,” the wolf states. “Ah, they didn’t tell you. The seven can be freed by us, and we have no grudge against their souls. They tricked you, mortal wolf queen. This was always their plan for freedom.”

Bitches.

My heart near enough stops when I realise what this means. “Wait, if you take their power and souls, my shield around the city will fall! It was created by them!”

There is silence, and the wolves do not move. The middle one looks right down at me. The pressure on my eyes to hold his gaze physically hurts. “That is your mortal concern.”

“No. No. NO!” I say, stepping forward. “Please don’t do that! You’ll kill thousands, hundreds of thousands of my pack. We need the shield!”

They growl at me, and my spine locks up as they freeze me in place. I can't move against it as I struggle to free myself. "Mortal lives are of no consequence to us. We are done helping humankind or shifters or angels. You are alone."

"Please!" I beg for my pack, for my alphas. They can't do this. "PLEASE!"

They stay so silent that my heart sinks. They don't have feelings, and I can sense their distaste for my begging.

"In payment of this completed mission, we will send you a gift. Goodbye, mortal wolf queen. Do not contact us again, or it will be your life that dies before it is time."

"NO!" I cry out as they turn and walk away, leaving me frozen as I scream and scream at them. The darkness fades away like the click of someone's fingers, and I'm left crying on the grassy ground. I push Niall away and run to the edge of the balcony, gripping the edges tightly. I look up in horror, realising what's happening right before my eyes as the shield slowly drops from the top down.

"The shield is dropping. Run!" I shout down my bond. "Run to protect the city."

"By the gods," Niall whispers, his own terror filling his voice.

I can do nothing as the shield completely disappears from around my pack, and the Levi flood the streets from every single direction.

"Mai, get out of this city. Right now. We are being overrun. There are too many Levi!" Silas manages to demand through the bond.

"No, I can save us," I whisper back. I will save us, even if I have to do the unthinkable. Even if I have to kill her.

Twelve



“WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?”

I let myself linger on Niall’s question for only a moment.

One moment to feel my pack, hear the wolves running and dying. See the terror in their eyes. To see my pack being flooded with so many Levi.

The Levi need to die. The monsters are mindlessly killing anything in their path, and Cenwyn has let them loose on the entire world.

“Mai, I can grab Dip and get the kids out of the city. You can come...,” Niall suggests. Tears fill my eyes.

“I’m not leaving my pack, and we are not running,” I exclaim. “The Wolven gods said that if I killed Erin, the Levi would all die. They’d disappear from this world because they’re here because of her. We stand a chance if she dies, and I know what I have to do.”

My voice wobbles, and Niall’s eyes soften. We watch each other, angel and wolf, at the end or a new beginning of the world.

He says nothing because he knows. He knows it will hurt my soul to do this to her. “I can kill her, Mai. For this world. For you and Dip.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “It has to be me. Even if I sent you, I’d still feel the crushing guilt. It wouldn’t make a difference, but I appreciate your offer. If she is going to die to save this pack, it should be its queen who lands the blow.”

My mates are struggling, but they are blocking me out, not wanting me to see how bad it really is, but I can feel it all through the bond with my pack.

They are dying.

“Protect the children,” I instruct Niall, knowing he can’t come with me to do this, and he reaches for me.

He pulls me into an unyielding embrace, but my spine stays locked stiff. “May the gods protect you, Maiy.”

“The gods aren’t helping us today,” I reply, letting him go and walking away. I start running straight down the stairs, back into the warm castle and towards the dungeons. The castle itself is filled with my pack, mostly women, elders and children who barely even look my way as they huddle and cry. They are hiding in corners of every room, of every corridor I pass, and only some look up at me in shock. I send a prayer to the castle itself to protect them.

A few guarding wolves, already shifted, follow after me, no doubt trying to protect me. I don’t pause in my sprint down the castle. I’m standing before the doors to the dungeon within ten minutes, and I’m highly aware that, every second that passes, one of my wolves is dying.

That my alphas are in danger. Cenwyn is winning.

My hands shake as I unlock the padlocks, one by one, until I’m through the three steel doors, leaving the wolves outside. Erin is sitting on her bed, wearing a cream dress that has been cut at the knees. The removed fabric is wrapped around her hair, holding it up in a messy bun. She looks better than she did the last time I saw her. She’s actually eaten, but I knew she was eating after our agreement; the guards told me so when I checked. She’s clutching the urn I gave her with Benjamin’s ashes inside, like she can feel whatever traces of her love are left in this world.

She looks up at me, wary shock flashing in her eyes. “Your pack is screaming. Why are you here and not fighting for them? I truly thought you’d be happily risking your life out there, leading the way.”

“I’m sure Cenwyn planned for that and was pissed when he didn’t find me.”

“Maybe,” she quietly replies, sharply looking away. I hate that, when I look at Erin, all I see is myself. The version of myself when I washed up on that beach and Henderson found me. She’s been lied to her whole life and twisted into this.

“Don’t bother attacking me,” I say as I break the lock on her door with my power, and the metal melts onto the ground. “Because I’m so angry and terrified for my pack that I’m a cornered wolf. An alpha female wolf, and I will completely destroy you.”

“Why?” she questions. She wants to know why I’m letting her out, but how can I possibly tell her?

“I want you to come with me,” I smoothly reply, only my shaky hands giving a thing away. I slip Morganis into my hand, nothing but a sharp dagger now. They have escaped, gotten the freedom they wanted, and nearly cost me everything. They might have cost me the entire war and my pack.

I swear she looks right through me for a moment. Like she can see the black stain on my ice-cold heart in this moment.

In this choice.

But instead of voicing any of her concerns, she walks out and follows me up. I hold Morganis tightly in my hand, almost wishing she would attack and make me feel somewhat less guilty if it were self-defence. This is murder. We pass shifted guards, who I tell not to move, and walk through the castle. Erin stares down at a little girl cuddled up into the side of her mother, who is singing her a lullaby.

I wonder what she would feel if she knew she could save them. She could stop the Levi. I head up several flights of stairs before I get to one of the highest balconies that overlooks the waterfall, almost on top of it. The water doesn’t drown out the sound of the pack, the echoing screams and cries, my wolves howling into the night for anyone to save them.

Each scream, plea and cry feels like a cut in my heart.

“It’s pretty here,” Erin says, looking at the falling water. “Did you bring me here to scatter Benjamin’s ashes?”

“No.”

Her brow furrows. “I don’t understand what you want, Mairin.”

“Have you heard of the Wolven gods?” I question. I need to explain it all. I need to make her understand why.

“They are a fairy tale,” she responds. “Your pack is screaming for help, and you want to talk about a fairy tale that scares kids into behaving for their parents.”

“They control all magic. All, Erin.” I pause. “They see you as someone who should not be here. A curse.”

She takes a step away from me. “What?”

“They see you as evil, and they are punishing us all because of you,” I say. “So many children, women...wolves will die. Your kind.”

“I’ve turned my back on wolves a long time ago. My inner wolf is gone, thanks to my goddess. She told me a spell to bind it away. Cenwyn has done the same,” she states.

“That’s the problem, Erin, because I don’t think you’re evil at all. I think that you’ve been warped and changed into this person your whole life by Oisean and Cenwyn. They have manipulated and gaslit you into this version of yourself. I don’t think you’ve ever had the chance to be yourself. To choose right or wrong. You’re a weapon.”

“My life—”

“But in the end, you could have hurt me a lot more than you did on that battlefield, and you didn’t. You are a young goddess who makes beautiful dresses and has beautiful magic within her soul. Deep down, I know that you’re not evil, and I wish you were. I wish you were exactly what the Wolven gods say you are.”

My voice shakes as much as my body does.

Her eyes search mine. “What are you going to do, Queen Mairin of the wolves?”

I clutch Morganis tightly, and her eyes flick to the blade. “Tell me.”

Holding my head high, I let the truth come out. “The Wolven gods want me to kill you because killing you gets rid of the Levi and saves my wolves. The Levi are created because of you being in this world. That’s why they’ve multiplied every year since you were born. That’s why they just exist, and no one knows where they came from. They are punishment to the world, to us, to mortals because you should not exist.”

She looks me in the eye. “So you brought me here to die because you couldn’t bear to kill me in that prison.”

“If I don’t kill you, Erin, thousands are going to die. Thousands of innocent people.”

She takes several steps back towards the door, clutching the urn like it could protect her. “Don’t. Please, don’t.”

I close my eyes for a second, and when I open them, I tell myself I can do this. For the pack. For my wolves.

“I don’t want to die,” she pleads, her eyes like glass. “You’re right. I lived my whole life in a prison practically. Benjamin was the only hope I had, the only thing that kept me alive. His love saved me. Beni was the only light in all of it, and he kept telling me that you were good. He told me that you spared his life that day you left Fenrir, and that’s why I held back. Even after Benjamin died, because in the back of my mind, I knew. I still know that you might actually be telling me the truth, that we were from the same pack, and I was stolen and used my entire life.”

“You were,” I sadly whisper. “I think you always knew. That’s why you became my friend...you felt the connection, and for the first time in your life, you doubted Oisean.”

“I wanted to be you when we met,” she tells me with a crooked, sad smile. “You’re beautiful and so inspiring as a

broken wolf who fought to be alpha female. The friendship was never fake. I...I'm sorry."

"I know. I thought a lot of you, enough to let you close," I whisper. "I'm sorry too."

But for what I'm about to do. For what her life was and could be.

"I don't want to die. I feel like I'm barely beginning to live," she whispers.

She doesn't move as I step forward, my legs feeling weak and ready to collapse at any moment. It makes it so much worse in a way that she's not trying to fight me. I look into her eyes, feeling my alphas fighting for their lives. My wolves, my pack and their queen have to do this. I have to do this. I owe them a chance.

I would die for my alphas, and even if this blackens a part of my heart, they will find a way to pull it back to life.

I freeze, unable to move myself as my heart locks up. I can't kill her. She was my friend. Gods, I can't do it. A horrible sickness fills the back of my throat as I know I'm letting down my pack, my alphas. I've killed people before. I killed so many before. But they've always been fighting me or I've been forced to do it. Yes, I may be forced to do this right now to save everyone, but it doesn't feel right. My gods, she's my friend.

Erin smiles in relief, tears falling down her cheeks as I lower my hand with the dagger, showing her that I can't do it.

I'm looking right at her as a dagger slides straight through her heart from behind her, a pale hand resting on her shoulder.

Aunt Reine pulls the dagger out of her chest and nods at me as I stare in unbelievable shock. The world slows down until all I can see is Aunt Reine holding a blood soaked dagger in a pale white dress like she has just woken up.

My eyes widen as I scream and reach for Erin as she falls forward. I catch her as she falls into my arms, the urn tumbling out of her hands and smashing onto the floor. I watch as the ash blows over into the waterfall and into the air, swirling

around us. Erin gasps, struggling to breathe as I place my hand over the hole in her chest.

“M-my heart was al-already broken,” she breathes out, my tears falling down my cheeks.

Reine kneels on the other side of Erin and gently places her cloak over her chest and tucks her head onto Reine’s lap. She strokes soft curls away from her sweaty forehead as I pick up her cold hand, holding on tight.

“My name is Reine, and I have been the alpha female of your pack. A lifetime ago, mind you. For this, I am sorry, but we both know your life is a tiny payment for saving a million innocent lives.”

“Aunt Reine,” I whisper. No life should be taken in payment. This is wrong, and I can’t fix it. I can’t save her.

“It wasn’t weakness, but love and strength. It shouldn’t have been you, Mai,” she tells me, a tight firmness to her voice. She looks back down at Erin. “I knew your mother. She was a beautiful female, brave and smart, if not a little clumsy at times. Matilda. She always wanted a female baby. Mati always wanted you. You look just like her. You have the same eyes, same cheekbones, but your nose and mouth, I would say, is your father’s, Dukecn. I remember him too. Unfortunately, there was a house fire that killed both your father and your older brother. It was so sad for your mother, who just wanted a house full of babies. It was devastating to her. I remember being with her so many nights when she cried and cried until the day she found out she was pregnant with you. She said you were candlelight in a winter’s storm.”

Erin sobs quietly, an echo of pain in her voice as she stares at Aunt Reine like she has all the answers in the world. “It wasn’t long after I’d had my own sons that a healer told your mother, sadly, that there was something wrong with the baby she was carrying and that she wouldn’t make it to full term. That was the last I saw of her. She left the pack, and I never saw her again. All the times I thought of her again, I assumed that she’d gone to find a human doctor to see whether they could help. But now I’m looking at you, realising that she

made a deal with Oisean. Of course the snake would have used her desperation, and he took you from her. He couldn't get the rest of our children, so he took you. He probably killed Mati because she would have searched the world for you otherwise. She would have been so happy you were alive because she loved you from the second she found out she was pregnant with you. That's what mothers do. That's what we all do as a pack, and I should have done more to stop this. I'm sorry that this has to be your end."

"How?" I question in the silence that follows. "How are you here? How did you know?"

I want to ask why did she do this, but we both know that answer.

"The Wolven gods forced me to wake up and told me that the alpha female wouldn't be able to do this task because your heart is too pure. I was a gift, a gift for taking the magic back," she tells me. "Taking life has never been easy, but I do what I must. Age has taught me this, and it will you one day. I had been fighting my way back, for my sons and you. I could sense the pack is in danger."

Erin coughs, a wet, horrible cough that leaves dots of blood around her lips. I lean close, Aunt Reine forgotten. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Erin. The friendship was real for me, too."

"C-create a world where wolves aren't stolen from their moth-mothers, Mai. Create a world where the g-gods don't touch us anymore. Make the world k-kinder."

"I will," I promise her, but she isn't here anymore. Her eyes are wide, empty as she stares up at the water, and I feel nothing but death in the stale air. A sob catches in the back of my throat, and it takes all my willpower to not burst into tears.

I find myself sinking into my bond, unable to be in the real world, and my mates fully let me in. I feel how tired they are as they fight through the angels and Levi. Right until the Levi all suddenly collapse into black dust that makes the battlefield and streets of the pack look like the glittering night sky.

Cenwyn's army pauses. Silas shows me it all, even the dead at his feet. Tears fall down my cheeks in droves as Silas raises his sword into the air.

“For the pack!”

His battle cry echoes down the bond to the pack, to everyone, and I feel my wolves stand to fight. I feel them have hope, belief that we can win, that the gods are on our side.

“I will be at your side soon,” I tell my mates before pulling out of the bond. Aunt Reine is laying Erin down, and I let her hand go, whispering the words, “We endure the fall and rise in the ashes. Rest, my friend. You are with your pack now.”

I lean over her and close her eyes before pulling the cloak over her face.

“I have to—”

I pause as Valentine's pure panic fills my mind through the bond as he reaches for me. He shows me a female on a roof, above where he is standing. I hoped I'd never see her again. I hoped I wasn't right about who controlled the Levi.

Adira.

She is alive...and she looks dead. Her skin is like ash, flaking into the wind; her hair looks like dark straw, and there are holes all over her arms, gaps in the fabric of her body that show bone. The gods must have forced her to pay a high price to leave The Rite Forest...they took her beauty and her body in exchange for power. I bet she didn't bank on that outcome. Her eyes are like blue diamonds as she looks down at Valentine and smiles through her rotting teeth and cracked lips.

“You can't save them both. Mai or the pack. You should have chosen me.”

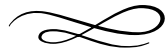
Her voice echoes, and it's like grating nails on metal. A red armoured angel, not from our army, grabs her and flies her away as Valentine jumps to grab her. Valentine runs and climbs up the building to the top, searching the skies before he finds her in the distance. The streets below are filling with angels and wolves tearing themselves apart, but he follows her.

Fearing for me. Adira is flying straight towards the castle; that's what he wanted me to know.

She is coming for me.

“I will deal with her,” I tell my mates, leaving Aunt Reine behind me as I can't face her and what she did to save my pack yet. A low growl builds in my throat. “Adira is mine.”

Thirteen



I ANGRILY STEP out the front doors of my home, pushing them apart with my power until they bounce across the stone walls, flickers of my green magic sparkling in the air. Bile crawls up my throat at the sight of wolves littered across the stone, their red blood flowing between the cracks of the stone. Just like the Levi ran into our city, flooding the streets with their darkness.

They are all dead. The wolves who stayed to guard the entrances of the castle, to protect the ones who cannot fight, and they have been slaughtered. My anger turns to fury, and I know exactly who to direct all of it at, as I try not to think of the dead wolves of my pack at my feet. I will avenge them and every wolf that has died because of her.

Adira stands at least ten feet away, with a line of ten angels behind her in red armour. Cenwyn made a deal with her, and I wonder if he would kill her now that her army is gone. How pointless she must feel now. She betrayed us all, and my heart is cold, stone cold, as I face her.

I need to be careful as she easily killed all these wolves, who look like they have been drained of everything they had, and I am outnumbered by a lot of angels and an angry goddess.

“I would say it’s nice to see you again, but the old version of you was so much better to look at,” I quip, lifting my sword.

“You’ve never been all that funny, Mai,” she replies, her voice empty of life.

I smile. “My mates find me amusing at times. Other times, not so much. They are usually far more *distracted* with me.”

It’s a low blow, but I want her as angry as I am. I want her to lash out and make a mistake. I know how she fights. I’ve seen her in battle and training. Emotions are anyone’s downfall in a fight. I can control mine...but I know she can’t.

The irritation in her eyes is a good start. “What god did you make a terrible deal with?”

She snarls. “I’m going to enjoy killing you, Mai. I can’t wait to feel your life fade away.”

I tilt my head. “We both know I’ll kill you first. Answer me, because I highly doubt the Wolven gods helped you like they helped me after you killed Tualla.”

After meeting the Wolven gods, I know it was them. They saved me, and that forest is theirs. It’s likely where the gods were changed from mortals into gods, where they signed their lives away to the Wolven gods. It’s also likely it’s where they died. The beginning and ending in that forest, in my home.

She doesn’t tell me a thing. I’m left only to guess. “Was it the goddess of persuasion and seduction you’re bound to? Did she seduce you into this?”

“No,” she finally replies, her voice calm. “I died the second you took the markings of alpha female. I felt my soul being taken from my body. Forced away. My need for revenge was the only string that allowed me to hold on.”

She died.

It makes more sense, considering she looks like a walking corpse. I want to feel sorry for her, but all the death she has caused, the innocents the Levi have murdered, stops me feeling anything for her at all except the urge to end her.

My wolf snarls in agreement.

“How did you stop them?”

I pause at her question. “Do you mean your little puppets? The Levi? Held on a string just like you wanted to make my alphas?”

She doesn't reply, so still as she stands there. “The Wolven gods tell me things, like exactly where the Levi came from and how to stop them. You may have been able to control them, Adira, but they weren't here because of you. You didn't make them. We may be gods, but we do not control magic.”

I step closer as I continue, “I broke their curse on the world, and I am going to make sure you never walk out of this city. Once, we could have been friends, and you had to go after what wasn't yours, making you bitter and cruel. Your obsession cost you everything, and I am your end. They are my wolves.”

“I see you in the night,” she breathes out, her eyes so different from what she was before this. Even her scent is nothing but a wisp of how she scented before. I don't know what she is now, but she isn't a wolf. She isn't alive. “A night wolf, born to three stars, born to rule.”

“What are you?” I question.

“Death.”

I'm not sure how she can be death, but I find it hard to believe she is fully Adira anymore. She is something else mixed with whatever was left of Adira. I'm sure only the parts of Adira left now are the strongest emotions she had. Jealousy and anger. The rest is something else that calls itself death.

“Does Cenwyn know what you are?”

At this point, I'm stalling, knowing that Niall and Callahan are coming to help me. I sent for them to help me the second I chose to come to Adira and face her out here. But they are both far away, Niall gone to help his men after seeing the children are okay, and Callahan with the alphas, and Breelyn with Deimos helping the angels fight. So far, it looks like we might be winning. Our wolves are fast, and the angels on our side are evenly numbering us now that the Levi are gone.

“The angel king that is so obsessed with you, just like everyone else, and he never cared what I was now. He barely looks at me,” she says. “This soul...she used to love him. Envied you. Loved him. Loved them.”

Jealousy rises in my throat. “At this point, it might be a kindness to end your life. You’re not Adira anymore. She’d never admit that.”

“She died, and we came back together after making a deal,” she replies so smoothly. The angels around her look worried, cautious, and they stand very still.

I can’t be the only one that senses how wrong she feels. So wrong.

I start walking towards her. I decided to kill her way before I came down here, and I’m more certain of it now. Today has been a day for death.

She will be next.

Adira only smiles and nods at the angels behind her. “Make sure that she doesn’t get in the way while I go and say hello to her precious daughter.”

My legs turn to steel as my heart races, fear pumping through my body. “You are not fucking touching my daughter, Adira. I will destroy you.”

Fear feels like an arrow slamming straight into my heart when she smiles and the angels move to block me from her. I run straight forward, spotting her heading to a side door into the castle. How can she know about Dip?

Gods, she is going to hurt my daughter. No. No. No. Draycian was right. She isn’t safe in this war. I have to stop her.

The angels land around me, all ten of them, until I’m surrounded.

I hold my weapons out and snarl. “It’s going to take more than ten of you to take me down. Leave and I won’t hurt you. Stay and you die. I’m the alpha female of this pack, and that’s the only offer you’re going to get.”

Unwisely, one of them laughs. I throw Morganis right at him, and the blade goes through his throat.

He coughs up blood before falling to the ground. "Last chance."

Two of them leave, but the others don't, and I brace myself. Seven angels. I can do this.

I let go of the power I've been building up since Adira ran, and slam it out of me like a wave, crashing into all of them that are left. They shout out in pain as they are burnt with my magic, smacking into the hard ground as I suck in a deep breath. I only get a second before a few of them fly up in the air, catching on the wind to slam right down on me. I jump into one of the angels, using my body to hit him hard and knock his sword out of his hand. I push off him and come back down with my sword as we both crash down, my sword cutting him across his side. I roll to a stop on my knee and look up as an angel punches me hard. I see stars as I fall back and spin, lashing out with my magic. The guard is wrapped in green vines, suffocating him as he screams while I stand up. I wipe my blood off my mouth, ignoring the metallic taste, and face the five angels facing me now.

The biggest one of them all runs at me, using his wings to move fast with the wind behind him, and I swing out with my sword to block his, both of us sliding back. A hand slams on my shoulder and pulls me back, crashing me to the ground. I slam face-first right on the ground, smacking my head on the hard stone, groaning with pain as a spell of dizziness flashes over me.

Too much time. Adira could be there by now.

I have to end this. I roll onto my back as the guard climbs over me, and I slam my legs hard into his stomach. He grunts and falls to the side, and I roll myself up to stand just as two angels land next to me.

Light and night.

My family.

Callahan stands on my one side, Niall on my other, and they both look murderous as they take in the situation.

“Now, boys, this is an unfair fight. You are all going to pay for touching her,” Niall says, spinning a sword in his hand. The angels look wary now, but they don’t run.

Callahan looks down at me. “Go.”

I don’t have to be told twice. I’m already running to the castle, heading straight towards where I know the children are. I skid across the castle floors, using the walls to pull myself along, and convincing myself over and over that I have time to get to them.

But the dread in my heart is enough to make me dizzy.

Gods, any gods, help them. Please help them.

I bang off the side of a wall and run, not caring about the pain or anything but getting to them. I pass so many bodies in the corridors, and tears fill my eyes at what Adira has done. I should have stopped her sooner and not let her get inside. I’ve failed them. Gods, I can’t lose my child. Please, no. I’m running as fast as I can as I finally get to the right floor and dive around a corner. I come to a grinding halt when I see a body on the floor outside the room, blood pouring from her shoulder.

Phim.

“NO!” I shout, running to her and pushing her onto her back. When I feel a pulse, I breathe. She is very pale. Maybe she was being drained of life, but she isn’t dead. For some reason, she isn’t. I look up at the open doors of Dip’s room, warm light pouring out.

Nothing in my life prepares me for the walk into her room, scared of what I’m going to find.

Adira is in the middle of the room, toys and furniture pushed over and blood dripping on the carpet from a blade in her hand. Phim’s blood.

Trey and Jesper are standing in front of Serendipity, who stands on the bed at the back of the room, peering over their

shoulders. She does not look scared, and when she sees me, she nods.

Adira looks back. "I'd never end this without you here. When that sweet girl dies, I will spend my time torturing both you and your sister. Both of you deserve a long death."

That's why she didn't kill Phim.

That mortal hate is still there in whatever she is now.

"Get out, you monster!" Jesper bravely shouts.

Adira laughs, the sound vile. "I can take life so easily, small wolf, but you are nothing."

"Adira, get the hell away from my family," I shout at her, already building my power up. Vines are crawling out of my back, lining the floor and waiting.

"Don't even think about it, Persephone," Adira says. The fact she calls me that name at all makes me wonder if the death god she talked about, who "helped her," was an enemy of Persephone's. Either way, I'm so done with gods and magic. They all need to die, for real, and leave us alone. We deserve our own life. Our own freedom.

We never chose to be bound to them.

My heart pounds as I watch every tiny movement Adira makes, and judge how quickly I can get between her and the children. I'm going to get between them, even if it means letting her attack me.

She lashes her hand out towards the children, but I'm there. I scream, my power moving to block hers, but she slams power into my chest, and I jolt backwards, stumbling. It's all the pause she needs. A scream rips from my throat as I realise I can't block the attack, and everything slows down in one horrible moment I know I won't forget.

I can only see my daughter's terrified eyes as they slip from green to a burning ember of fire.

Dip pushes the boys to the side, stronger than she should be, and holds up her hands. She screams as her whole body erupts on fire, and a wall of flames spreads out of her

fingertips into the room. I barely get a second to protect myself with my power before I'm flying across the room, and I crash straight through a wall, out into the corridor. I swear I see stars for a second, coughing out dust and ash as I struggle to lift my head off the ground. I can't see anything through the dust until it starts to settle.

What the hell just happened?

I rush to the room, worried about Dip after seeing her on fire, but she is fine, held in Trey's arms. He looks at me with wide eyes as I sigh, leaning against a piece of the wall that is still burning. I stand up, dust falling off me, and touch the side of my head where there is a nasty cut bleeding.

"Phim!" I shout, looking around for her, but I can't see anything under the dust and embers flickering around in the air.

Adira stands, unnaturally so, fire burning away her hair, but she doesn't seem to care. I ignore the burns all the way down my arms and on my cheeks as I leap to stand in front of the children, blocking her view. Even while aware that my daughter might be a serious threat to stand in front of right now, I'm going to defend her. This isn't her fight anymore. I pick up my sword off the floor and hold it out. I swear it flashes with yellow light, like Chaitala is still here with me.

I hate her for betraying me.

But in this moment, I can only think of my mum holding this sword against Cenwyn's armies to defend me.

It's been held twice now by a mother defending her child.

Hopefully, this will be the last time and this breaks the cycle when I kill her with it.

Adira looks behind me. "So the dragon god still walks this mortal realm. Oh, how interesting to some that information might be to those who have hunted him for a million years."

Dragon god?

"I don't give a shit what you're going on about, but you can stay the hell away from my daughter," I bite out.

I slam my power into her in full force, not waiting this time. My green magic slithers around her entire body in hundreds of vines that pull tight as I walk to her. She lashes back out at me, fighting off my magic with her own, but I'm stronger than whatever she is.

I'm more determined. She is not touching my child.

I've always been stronger, even when I doubted it. My alphas saw it. They always saw me, the real me that was hidden by years of trauma. I'm never going to be that scared female again. Adira fights, screaming my name as a curse, as my power smothers her, pushing her under as though it's water and she is a heavy stone.

She kneels on the floor in front of me, and I lean down. "If only you bowed rather than hated me so much, Adira. We could have been friends."

Phim passes me in her wolf form, and she doesn't even pause before she jumps at Adira. I release my power just before she crashes into Adira with nothing but sharp teeth. I watch, never looking away as she brutally rips Adira to pieces.

When she is done, I look at my sister, feeling so relieved she is okay and Adira is dead. "Burn the body, sister."

She is death, and I don't know if ripping her apart can even stop her, but there is enough fire around her to make sure she is gone. I turn around and run to the children, dashing to my knees in front of Serendipity as Trey puts her down. I brush some of the curls from her face, her skin feeling red hot.

She's covered in dust and ash, but not burnt anywhere. She was on *fire*, and she is somehow unhurt. I don't understand how it's possible. Trey and Jesper sigh, sitting on the bed that is little more than charred sheets.

"It's over," I tell them all, and myself. The war isn't over, but they are safe for now, and they need to hear it as much as I do.

"You're hurt, mama," Serendipity says.

My heart stops for all the right reasons, and tears fill my eyes. "I'm okay, baby. Only a little blood."

I pat her shoulder and gulp. “How did you do that? Have you always been able to do that?”

“No,” she replies, her voice so innocent. “He gave me the power, and he’s coming to help you.”

“Who?” I ask, but I think I know.

“Draycian,” she sweetly replies. “He talks to me in here.”

Bastard.

Dragon god or not, we are going to have some words when this is over. I don’t know if he is coming to help, but whatever he did today was crossing a boundary...even if he saved us all from Adira. I hate the bastard, but I have to thank him for this.

I look over my shoulder at Phim, who is shifted back and limping to us. Turning back to Dip, I tell her, “I’m really proud of you, and you’re such a brave girl. I have to go.” I pause and look into her eyes. I don’t see any embers in them now. Just green fire that has always been there. I kiss her on the forehead. “Be brave. Listen to your aunt.”

She nods and grips my hand tightly for a second before I have to let go. I turn to Trey and Jesper, such brave boys, who stood ready to protect my daughter. My heart swells with love and gratitude for them. “Boys, thank you for your bravery. It won’t be forgotten.”

“How is it going out there?” Phim questions, limping to me.

I look her up and down. “You need to sit down.”

She shakes her head, her eyes nothing but stubborn. I sigh. “I don’t know, exactly. I need to go to them. Will you—can you—stay here and protect them?”

I search through my bond, worried about the silence, but feel nothing but anger and their wolves on the other side. They must have shifted. I blocked them out so they wouldn’t be worried about my emotions as they fight, but now I need them. I have to leave.

“I can fight,” she tells me and lowers her voice. “Did you know your daughter could do that? Maybe we all should be

worried about her instead of the army outside.”

“No,” I whisper back and hug her carefully, not wanting to hurt her. “It was Draycian. Don’t let him near her until I’m back. Promise me. He isn’t gone.”

“I won’t. On my life, sister,” she whispers. “Go.”

I walk away, over the rubble and out into the corridor. I rush down the corridor, almost bumping into Callahan and Niall. They both have blood on their clothes, and Callahan looks terrible. He has been fighting for a long time, and I hate that I need to send him back into battle with me.

“I need you to fly me across the city,” I say as way of hello.

“Dip?” Niall questions, looking me up and down.

“Fine... She did this.” I wave a hand at the destruction behind me.

“What?” he questions, dumbfounded and likely wondering if I hit my head too hard, and I blink.

“Go to her, we are leaving,” I tell him, patting his shoulder and walking to Callahan. “Are you okay to fly?”

“I’ve fought my entire life, Mai. I’ve got you,” he replies and frowns, stepping closer and looking at the side of my head. “You’re injured, Mai.”

“A little cut won’t stop me. My wolf will heal me over time,” I say. “Let’s go.”

Callahan grabs me around the waist before holding me tight to his body and flying right down the corridor as I bury my head in his chest. The cold air is welcome as we get outside, and I look at the courtyard for a second to see the bloodstained stone. We are flying across the forest outside the castle when something inside me breaks. I clutch at my chest, by my heart, as a scream rips out of my throat. Unimaginable pain shoots right through my chest, and I can’t breathe or focus as Callahan shouts my name. He shoots us down into the trees to hide us and looks down at me.

“Mai!” He shakes me, but I can’t breathe. I can’t focus. I soon realise the pain isn’t from me at all, but from the bond. Henderson. He is dying, I can feel it.

“I love you. You were always the only one for my soul, Mai,” Henderson whispers down our bond. A goodbye.

“Hens!” I scream down the bond. Silas, Ragnar, and Valentine are in my mind in a second before they show Callahan in his mind where to go.

“We are coming. Protect our mate, Callahan.” I hear an echo of Silas’s voice. I can’t feel anything but Henderson’s pain and the pure terror of my mate dying.

Gods, we can’t have fought all this to lose each other. I can’t lose my mate. Callahan flies me straight out of the trees, skimming between angels that try to attack him, but he is too fast for them. We land on a rooftop, and I’m running down the stairs into the building from the side, or what’s left of it. I have to jump off the top of the broken stairs into the rubble and crawl across it before I start to pull some rocks back to find Henderson under it all.

There’re dozens of dead angels in here, but something went wrong. One of them got to him. There’s a spear going straight through his stomach, into his heart.

“By the gods, Hens,” I cry, Callahan landing behind me and protecting me. I shake Henderson’s shoulder, but he doesn’t wake. His dark wolf is still, but his chest is moving, even with a spear slammed right into the middle of it.

That was the pain I felt.

I can’t lose him.

“Let me help. Let me end this and save him,” Persephone whispers to me, like she is right there at my side.

“Heal him, and I will let you in,” I reply in my mind, my hands dug into Henderson’s fur.

“A deal is a deal,” she whispers back, a dark caress down my mind.

Henderson starts to glow green, brighter than any power I've called before, and I know it's not mine. I don't know how she is healing him, but she is. Callahan roars as the ground opens up under him, and he falls right into a crack in the earth. I freeze, unable to move as Cenwyn stands in the broken archway of the house in red armour.

We stare each other down.

I wonder if he knows just how much I'm going to enjoy seeing him die.

Callahan bursts out of the hole and goes right to Cenwyn, who is smiling at me. Cenwyn's hand fills with lightning, and he slams Callahan into the wall with a whip of it. "Callahan!"

"Looks like we are alone once more, Mai," Cenwyn says as I pull my eyes from Callahan's broken form on the ground. I stand up and raise my head high. "Henderson didn't quite see my attack until it was too late. Shame he will die *now* and not after he gets to witness me take you back. You're coming with me."

I'm about to tell him to piss off when three massive black wolves crash through the side of the building and surround me.

My alphas. I smile.

Cenwyn snarls, lightning crashing as rain starts to pour from the skies outside.

He looks like a furious lightning god as he stands in front of us.

But they are my Hades. In the fight between darkness and light, I'm always voting for the dark to win.

Cenwyn will die, because I'm not going anywhere, and they'd never allow me to be taken again. We will always fight for each other. Until the end.

Henderson rises from the ground, his black fur sparkling with my power still, and my knees weaken in relief.

"I'd love to stay and chat, Cenwyn, but I believe my mates want you all to themselves," I say as my alphas growl in agreement. They step in front of me, and I smirk at Cenwyn.

“Burn in hell, Cenwyn, and remember that I will never, ever care about you. No one will.”

My alphas turn the room into red shadows right before they attack.

Fourteen

ℒ

VALENTINE

VALENTINE FALL

THERE IS nothing but shadows and darkness, and her.

Our mate.

We attack Cenwyn as one wolf, all four of us, becoming what we have always been: Hades. The Dark God.

Cenwyn roars as our shadows smother him and the ground cracks under our feet. We don't let him do more than that, though.

Silas reaches Cenwyn first, slamming into him with his teeth bared and bites down hard on his shoulder. We keep the shadows around us, blocking out the light as Silas throws Cenwyn across the ground. He slides to a stop, clutching his bloody shoulder as he rises up.

I shift back.

The shadows wrap around my body like a cloak. My brothers stay at my side. "Valentine. I'm surprised you are the one they chose to talk to me."

He looks around, cracking his knuckles. "Where is our Mai darling? Have you hidden her from me?"

I don't smile as white-hot rage fills my body. "You locked up our brother with that monster, took his place, and lied to us all. You touched our mate when she didn't know who you were. You broke her bones when she did know it was you and didn't want you back. You kidnapped her and got her mother killed. You slaughtered our pack, killed half the world, and broke so many people. Cenwyn, you are going to die for these crimes. I believe in last words, do you have any?"

"Oh," he laughs, straightening up. He stretches his hand out. Lightning crashes through the darkness into his hand. "I don't think so, plus Mai loves me. She doesn't admit it, but I

know she does. You are not the only male in her life, and she will be mine!”

I tsk. “Our mate only belongs to herself, and the only parts of her that belong to us are the parts she chooses to share. She will never be yours.”

I’ve seen every memory Mai has of Cenwyn, everything he put her through in the weeks we were apart, and I know that every inch of pain he is going to suffer will be deserved. I want to spend hours, days, ripping him apart slowly, but our pack needs us. The war is not won yet, but we are turning the tide to victory.

When their king dies, some of the angels will run from the pack.

And we will do what wolves do best: chase.

“She won’t be your mate for long,” he sneers.

I chuckle low. “Wanna bet?”

With nothing but fury in his eyes, he throws a bolt of sparkling blue lightning at me, and with a hand of shadows, I catch the lightning and let it disappear into nothing. That trick won’t work. Hades told us how to stop it. Shadows take out any light, including lightning. Silas growls, stalking closer.

Cenwyn gulps, flickering his wings out. My shadows grab hold of those horrible wings, holding him in place so he can’t move. He can’t fly away.

“You’re a wolf, born in our old pack, and we are your alphas,” I state, walking towards him. His eyes widen, fighting what he knows deep down. He has never, not once, fought us on even ground. I always wondered why he had to drug us and chain us up before we woke up...because he can’t be around us.

He can’t fight us.

We are his alpha, and no wolf can resist our command.

“Fall to your knees, king of the angels,” I demand. “Bow to your kings, to your alphas.”

“Fuck off. You are not my alphas,” he shouts, fighting and trying to shake off the shadows, trying to call his powers, but they don’t work here. This is our home, our pack, and in the darkness, only we rule.

I shift back into my wolf, and we all descend upon him, cornering him into our darkness. The ground shakes, a tiny inch of his power escaping, but it’s nothing on us.

This world is our shadow.

Cenwyn might have buried that wolf down in his soul, turning him mad, but I can sense it. It’s broken, weak and useless because of what Cenwyn has done to get rid of that part of his soul. Oisean, his father, wanted him to have the power of both races but to be only an angel to rule his world because Oisean couldn’t. He wasn’t strong enough.

You can’t escape being a wolf.

Silas attacks first, ripping off Cenwyn’s wing, and he howls in pain. His sharp wings might cut Silas’s mouth up, but Silas doesn’t pause. I dig my claws into his other wing, like the hundreds of angels, if not more, that I’ve killed today already. Under the steel sharp tips, it’s just flesh and bone. My wolf is coated in angel blood. Henderson and Ragnar jump on Cenwyn and tear at him with their claws until there is very little left but a bloody mess on the ground.

Still clinging on to life, Cenwyn looks up at me. “T-tell her I love—”

Silas rips his throat out before he can finish that sentence, and he coughs the rest of the sentence out before the light fades from his eyes. Dull and empty and gone. Gone for fucking ever. Hell will burn his soul for his crimes. I won’t be telling our mate anything, and he doesn’t know how to love.

We love her.

We protect her.

All of us stare down at the broken king in the shadows before pulling them back. The houses around us are nothing but rubble, dust, and dead bodies.

The king dies as one of them, and he means nothing.

We leave him in the dust and look for our mate.

I shift back, grabbing trousers off the ground that ripped slightly when I shifted, and pull them on. She doesn't move, doesn't turn back. I run over and touch her shoulder, only to feel a buzz of magic that stings.

"Mai..." I say, realising too late that our magic is gone from her. The binding magic on Persephone.

Mai looks at me, her eyes dark and empty, and it's not her at all.

I step back from her and growl. "Persephone."

My brothers come to my side and shift back. They use shadows to wrap cloaks around themselves like I did.

"I won't be long...but you should go. Your pack needs you," she says, and in a flash, a green sphere of magic appears around her and pushes us back. I slam my fists against it only to be thrown away.

Henderson steps in front of us all. "Mai let her in. We have to trust there was a reason for it. Persephone could have hurt Mai at any time, but she didn't. She helped us. She found the seven for us. We need to end the war before we can get Mai back."

Silas growls and shakes his head. "This is crazy. That's our mate!"

"And if the pack falls, so does she. Cenwyn might be dead, but Oisean isn't. Let's go!" Ragnar demands with a growl before shifting back. I look one more time at the green sphere and growl under my breath before running to the nearest building that is still standing. My brothers are running right into the battle, but I want to have a look, see what is going on. I feel down the pack bond and sense something is wrong behind me. I turn in the direction of the change in the pack, in the wolves, and see nothing but fire on one side of the city.

Gold wolves run through the fire, right into the city, ripping apart red armoured angels on their way.

“Draycian’s wolves,” Silas growls in my mind, seeing what I’m showing him, even as he rips apart five angels with nothing but his teeth and red shadows to hold them in place. “If he thinks he is getting Dip for this, he is mistaken.”

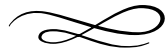
“Oisean is running,” Henderson tells me, showing me Oisean and a group of at least a thousand angels flying away. An army of black crashes into him from the side, and I just about spot Deimos in the crowd of angels that take them down.

“Let’s end this war, brothers,” I state, looking at the bulk of the angel army fighting us on the left side of the city. Draycian has the right, and we have to trust him this once.

“For Mai and Fall Mountain Pack.”

I growl as I shift and run straight into the battle.

Fifteen



I FALL STRAIGHT into nothing but pure, smouldering light for a second.

Just for one second, before I realise that I'm kneeling on the ground in front of the altar I made for the Wolven gods. I was in the city, and Henderson... I feel down my bond, which feels like a distant thread, and sense them all alive, fighting Cenwyn. Ending him.

“Why are we here?” I whisper into the wind, my lips not moving as my body freezes. My hands shake as I feel Persephone's essence through my soul, through my body and mind, like a puppet master tugging on strings. She's let me out of this cage, a cage I willingly threw myself into for saving Henderson. I felt like I was locked away for only a second, but it must have been longer. I'm here, not in the darkness, but it's very much clear who's still in control. I can't move my body, but I can think.

Even if it hurts with every thought. There was never enough room in my mind for us both. My shaky hands move of their own accord and wave over the flames, lighting them again, this time with green flames.

Persephone's voice fills my mind. “We are going to call the Wolven gods, and they are going to set us free. Hades and me. All the gods bound, even if their mortals are dead. They will be reborn unless this ends today.”

“No!” I tell her, pushing against her control in my mind to speak. “You can't call them back. They will kill me, they told

me as much. They said I'd die."

"Death isn't so bad, Mai," she smoothly replies without an inch of guilt in her voice. "You will be free and with your alphas as they follow you in death."

"I don't want us dead," I bite out.

"You have to trust me and trust that I care for you," she whispers softly.

"I am done trusting gods or any ancient mortal spirits in weapons or anything else to do with your world. All any of you do is try to destroy my life. Don't you think that we want our own lives, our own freedoms? We didn't choose to be bound to you!"

Her calmness grates on my nerves as she doesn't reply. "You were created from mortals to protect your fellow mortals, to protect your families, to protect us. And yet, what you're doing right now is far from what you were created to do. I can see why the Wolven gods hated you so much in the end, why they cursed you into this life."

My body shakes, and pain laces into my mind. It feels like it's cracking. "The Wolven gods coerced us because they wanted us to be like them. To be them, but without any freedom. You're right, we were mortals. I was born in that forest, in a tiny little hut that is nothing but dust now. Demeter was my mortal mother. Everyone was completely in love with my mother, but she was extremely beautiful until one night she was attacked. She never saw his face, never knew who'd done it, but it left her pregnant with me. The village rallied around her, protecting her, saying that the child would be brought up as one of the children in the village and they would keep the secret so Demeter could still keep her innocence and marry when she was slightly older. She was young, only seventeen, when she gave birth to me."

The wind howls, and I can't hear anything else but it as Persephone fills my mind with images of her past. Memories. The forest I got my powers in, unlocked her, and found my wolf, but years ago. Two beautiful women, mother and daughter. Happiness. "I was treasured in that village, like a

jewel, my beauty outshining even my mother's. I made many friends, many lovers, if you wish to know. But there was a problem. Our village was cursed. I was the last child born to anyone, and Demeter believed that my birth stopped the forest from giving life altogether in punishment of whoever my biological father was. No children were being born, not even animals. Even pregnant women who came in the village would lose their child before it could be born. They were dying.

“That’s when they came. The Wolven gods came to us, walking the mortals’ land like they never had before. Everywhere they stepped, it glowed with power under their paws. They promised me immortality. They promised me power, control, and the ability to hunt down who had hurt my mother all those years ago. They promised my mother exactly the same, and we took it, unaware of the binds that would come with that kind of magic. We were made immortal. We were gods to our families and friends. I only had to touch a shoulder of a woman and she’d be pregnant that evening from her male. I could make the land fertile beneath my feet so that new deer ran in the forests and life burst into the world.

“The seasons were long gone, but my mother’s power easily changed this. There was bright summer sunlight in the grey world. There were the bright colours of autumn, the fresh snow of winter, and early buds of spring. The winds turned from summer to spring to winter to autumn, to whatever she needed to help grow crops and fertilize the land for the mortals. We were loved, admired, practically queens to them as they grew. We soon realised we were not the only gods that were created in each corner of the world to save it, but we hid away from them. My mother was fearful of males, and she didn’t want to risk a god finding us with the rumours we heard of their cruelty to mortals.”

“Why tell me this?”

“In death, you deserve all of the truth, Mai,” she tells me. I want tears to fall down my cheeks, but I only feel them in my heart. She really is going to kill me. All of this...it’s going to end in death. “Truthfully, I was trapped in that forest, in that village. All the family and friends we knew died in their short

mortal lives, and we kept living on, kept helping, on and on it went. I had lovers over the time, but then there was him. Hades. He swept into the forest and took me away.”

The affection I hear in her voice, just from his name, reminds me of how I speak about my alphas. “Hades promised me freedom, promised to show me the world, and in exchange, he wanted my love. I gladly gave him it. I loved him with all of my heart and soul. He showed me every corner of the worlds from heaven to hell to every inch of the mortal realms. My mother was livid. She was so protective over me because of how I was born, and we started a war that killed so many. In truth, we probably did deserve the curse.”

“If I’m going to die...what is it like?”

I feel her make my face smile. “I do not know, not truly. I am cursed. I love Hades, and I cannot touch him in death. I can only feel him through a bond, from a mortal like you before. There was just darkness, a darkness where we were alive and aware, but never there in our souls. Never moving. All of us gods, immortal but frozen.”

“Then Oisean—”

“Ah, the angel,” she muses. “We pushed into the mind of a random angel who prayed to us, and told him exactly what to do to get us out. It took many thousands of years to build up that power to speak to him. We told him to gather pregnant females and to make sure that he had the seven weapons. We told him a spell to call them to him for a short time. We talked him through the ceremony.”

He was a puppet for the gods, too. “But something went wrong... He was broken by our touch. He created an eighth. That was never the plan.

“Either way, we knew that the children would then be born with a soul bond to us and that we’d finally be able to come back to the real world and find each other. That’s what Hades and I wanted. Zeus, on the other hand, he wanted the mortals to pay. He thought he was a king to them, and he treated them as slaves. Zeus couldn’t believe the mortals would simply stop believing in him, forget him, and none of them tried to get him

back. They were happy he was gone, and for years, so many years, he planned his revenge.”

Considering millions died, he got what he wanted in the end. “It was different for us. I didn’t want to control your life, but to guide you. I cared for you from the second I was bound to your soul and born again. I was there in the shadows of your mind the entire time throughout your life. I watched as you grew up in the pack with the parts of Hades’s soul, falling in love with them. I watched you suffer through the Ravensword Pack all the time, right down to that mating pool you walked into. It was me who pushed into the world through your fingertips in that water and directed the bond straight towards the alpha, making a fake connection. I hoped that it would make you alpha female of the pack and that you’d have a chance to kill him for what he did. But instead, it led you straight back to Hades.”

“I nearly died,” I remind her.

“Yes, there is always such a price to pay for magic, but that time worked well for you. The water didn’t take your life, I made sure of it,” she softly says. “I’m sorry that this is your end, Mai. But we cannot be bound to your soul for the rest of our lives.”

“Please don’t,” I whisper. “You say you care for me. You’ve watched me grow up and watched over me...don’t kill me.”

“The curse must end,” she firmly replies, not a hint of emotion in her voice. I don’t believe she cared about me at all.

I look at her blood sacrifice, a male angel’s body lying broken in the circle, much bigger than the one I made, his blood pouring onto the ground. I can’t smell anything but his blood, and I can’t hear anything other than my pounding heart. I suppose there were plenty of bodies for her to use.

“Alphas,” I cry down the bond, but I have no clue if they hear my desperate cry for my mates.

Persephone starts to chant, speaking the ancient words out of my own lips even while I try to resist, try to fight her power

over me. But she's literally bound to my soul, controlling my mind and body. I can't stop her. She chants over and over before I'm suddenly swarmed by a familiar darkness blocking out everything else. The darkness is different from the last time. This time, the pool of water on the ground is white, soft, and it does echo ripples as Persephone makes us face the Wolven gods with a look of contempt. I feel them before they appear, and this time they are angry, their anger like daggers pressing on my soul as I bow low.

"It's been a long time since we've seen each other again, Persephone."

Their voice fills my mind.

"Take the Apple of Discord, the last of your power in the mortal lands, and free us. End the curse," she bluntly demands from my mouth. "We've deserved our punishments, but we both know you want the Apple of Discord back more than you want to curse us forever. End this."

"No, don't," I scream in my mind, but no noise comes out. I feel so powerless.

"Does the mortal wolf queen know she will die alongside the alphas that she loves so much?"

"I don't want this!" I scream over and over, and if they hear me, they don't say anything. I know they can hear me, but they don't have the emotion to care. Not when Persephone is offering them the crown. The crown held within my body, latched onto her power. I wonder why they didn't take it before.

"We cannot take what is locked in a mortal heart," one of them says. "It must be freely offered."

"And it is," Persephone reassures. "There's a high price for freedom," she replies. "Their pack is saved thanks to the powers that we gave them that latched onto their souls."

The wolf on the far right, his eyes warmer than the others, looks directly at me. "I did warn you, if you called us again, you would die. I never said it would be by our hand. May death be kind to you all."

“Please don’t, Persephone,” I plead with her. I feel her, a dark caress across my soul.

“Trust me,” she whispers to me.

Something snaps, something hurts more than any pain I’ve felt, and my soul literally sets on fire within me. I scream, the darkness and Wolven gods fading away as I fall onto my back. I gasp, the pain locking my body right as green light pours out of my soul. It floats up into the darkness, and I can do nothing but fade as my soul breaks.

* * *

I feel like I’m floating under warm water, watching the colours of a world just above the surface. Red, black, and gold. It all shimmers softly and beautifully, as male hands reach into the water and pull me out. I gasp for air, only receiving punishingly hot air as I blink my eyes open at the male holding me as he gently sets me down on the riverbank. On blistering hot red stone.

Hades.

The god of death...in the flesh. That can only mean one thing.

“Am I dead?”

He nods, standing up, and he looks behind me. “They are dying, as my soul leaves them, making me whole in hell once more.”

“Please save them,” I plead, crawling to my feet, a white dress clinging to my body. I look around at hell, which is far more beautiful than I thought it would be. Walls of fire make the borders, clifftops curl around the edges, and there is a thick forest of trees with pomegranates hanging off the branches. Within the forest, I see a sweet cottage made of red stone.

At its door, Persephone stands, and she bows her head to me.

“I am sending you back, Mairin, as a gift for saving us,” Hades tells me. My eyes widen, and he places his large hands on my shoulders. “And I will not let them die. I control death, after all. This is not your time. The Wolven gods always hated that I controlled what they did not. I was death long before they ever came to me. I promised my soul to them to find Persephone, my true mate. My wife.”

“Th-thank you,” I whisper.

He darkly chuckles and looks at his wife and then back to me. “No, thank you. Live your life freely, as it should have always been.”

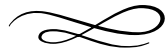
Hades shoves me hard into the water, and I gasp, falling right into the depths and into a pitch darkness that welcomes me.

I wheeze as I wake up on the rooftop garden, smoke high in the dark sky, angels flying around within like sparkling black stars. *How long have I been gone?* The noise of the pack, the bond, all of it comes back at once as I sit up and look across the garden. I feel for my mates, finding them just outside the castle gates, running to me. I search the entire pack bond and find we are winning the war. Cenwyn’s angels are running from the city. I grin with mind-melting relief and climb to my feet, running down the castle and out into the courtyard, where my four wolves are waiting for me.

I fall to my knees, and they surround me, pressing against me.

Death saved us in the end.

Sixteen



MY BLACK DRESS floats across the floor as I walk into the room, my alphas on either side of me and all of us wearing black crowns. My bones ache from a long court meeting to discuss a million different things, but I still smile when I see Deimos and Niall waiting in the throne room with a group of their people waiting on either side in small parties with many, many suitcases and boxes.

“I presume you’re leaving us, then,” Henderson questions.

Deimos grins and bows his head where his own golden crown sits. “It’s been two weeks, and it’s time. We are leaving some of our kind here to heal and others to stay with females they have taken a liking to.”

He wiggles his eyebrows, and we all laugh. Deimos walks to me and takes my hands. He has a wicked, new, nasty scar down the side of his face, but he is nothing but joyful. Behind him, by the door, Indra stands with his two twin daughters. We sent wolves and angels to destroy Cenwyn’s court, what was left of it, the second that it was clear that we were winning the war. They went to the castle and rescued the twins and brought them back here unharmed. I watched a viscount fall to his knees in front of his daughters and cry as they all held each other, and we left them together for hours. The girls look traumatised, which I suppose they would be after all those years as prisoners of Cenwyn. But Deimos is going to take them home, and time will heal. It will heal us all.

“I do hope we’re invited to the shores of Fenrir sometime soon.”

“We will host a magnificent party on the beach, in your honour, queen and alpha female of Fall Mountain Pack,” he replies, inclining his head. “And its kings and alphas, too.”

“I look forward to it,” I say, feeling emotional. I will miss him, oddly enough. I know my alphas will too.

“A party would be a good break, well needed in the next years to come,” Ragnar agrees.

Deimos looks me in the eye. “You can all come and see the developments we’re going to make. Freeing all the humans is our first law, and helping them build cities again will be the next.”

The amount of joy I feel from that sentence is hard to even think about. I think of those humans that I saw on the streets of Fenrir, in the world, who are suffering. For them to have their own freedoms, to get a bit back of the world they lost, is something to celebrate.

I push his hands aside and give him a tight hug instead, which makes Valentine growl low. Deimos chuckles and holds me tightly before letting me go. “Which one of you overly possessive bastards growled, then?”

“Me, you fucker,” Valentine states and then pats Deimos’s shoulder with a friendly smile. “I don’t like males touching her. Not even you.”

Possessive bastards.

I kind of like it. Okay, I love it.

Deimos talks with my alphas as I head to Niall, who is waiting. He doesn’t want the title of king of his court, but his people gave him it, anyway. We need new rulers with pure hearts and good leadership, which he has in swarms even if he doesn’t think so. I glance at my old maid, who has packed and is ready to go with Niall. Turns out he was busier than I thought during these last two weeks as we’ve buried our dead, secured our city limits, and sent out our wolves into the world to hunt down any angels that ran. They will die just like

Cenwyn, his body destroyed, thrown into the pit of darkness at the bottom of the waterfall, alongside all the angels who died fighting for him.

And the dust of the Levi with them. Good riddance. I hope Hades shows them exactly what hell is like for monsters.

“Feels wrong to be leaving,” he tells me, placing his hands on my shoulders. “But you’re a queen, a mate, a mother and alpha female who rules a damn big pack. I know you don’t need me.”

“A part of me will always need you. You’re my dad,” I tell him. His eyes go glassy, and he tugs me into a tight hug.

“Always, Maiy,” he promises as I hold him just as tightly. My alphas don’t growl when Niall hugs me. “I will be back soon. Like I said, the king title really isn’t for me. I’ll find a good leader, someone who will definitely deserve it, and live here with you and Dip.”

“I’d love that,” I tell him. “You are very welcome here with us. With your family.”

“My job in your court is one I won’t be giving away,” he replies with a wink. Our court is growing. Adding angels wasn’t taken as badly as we thought by the wolves. Many of them actually thanked Niall and Callahan when they came in. I’m absolutely certain that we are going to change the world with the laws that we’re going to put in place to protect wolves, angels, and humans. We are fighting for true freedom and safety for everyone, and before I die, many, many years in the future, I want that for the world.

“Have a good flight,” I tell him, stepping back. He nods and waves to the alphas before leaving Deimos and his party not far behind him.

“Phim and Dip will be here soon. What do you want to do for the evening?” Henderson questions, nodding at the guards to shut the doors.

Valentine wraps his arm around my waist, and I sink into his touch, pondering Hens’s question. “We could grab some food, curl up with a book and just rest.”

“I was thinking about training but—”

The throne room doors are pushed open, our guards smacking across the room and crashing into the steps. My smile drops as I look down, seeing Phim in the pile of guards, and all of them are sleeping. Not dead, but hurt.

My alphas all growl, the sound deafening as we brace ourselves. Valentine pushes me behind him, and I peer over his shoulder.

Draycian strolls into the room with Serendipity resting on his shoulder, fast asleep in her pink pyjamas, a pink blanket tucked around her. She doesn't stir at the noise, and fear crawls up my throat. I knew he hadn't gone, but since he came to help us in the war, he has been silent. Apparently, he was waiting until our allies had gone before taking her.

We shouldn't have left her. Even with Phim. This day was always coming, and if we have to take him down, we will. We aren't powerless; our power from Persephone and Hades is still here but dimmed. Not as strong as before.

“She is fine,” Draycian tells me, directly me, like he can see my panic. But she isn't fine. He has her. I freeze, not knowing what to do. I can't exactly attack him.

“Give her back, or it's your head,” Silas warns.

“No,” Draycian smoothly replies. “It's time. A deal is a deal. You agreed to the price, and you have your reward. You have your pack.”

“No,” I shout, stepping forward from behind Valentine.

“She didn't even know Dip was alive when she made the deal, and it's fucking madness. You can't steal her child,” Ragnar demands.

“It's wrong,” Henderson flatly states. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Why could you possibly want her, anyway?”

Silas is nothing but fury held within a wolf. “She is ours, and you're not taking her anywhere. We don't even know you.”

“You don’t have a choice,” Draycian flatly replies. “I am one of the last dragon gods that walk this earth. I was born at the same time as the Wolven gods, and they know I am their only weakness. They are mine too. Thanks to you and Serendipity being in danger, they are aware I still walk the mortal lands.”

“That sounds like a you problem,” Valentine states, but my eyes never stray from my daughter. This all doesn’t feel real.

I can almost feel what he is going to say before he says it. “She is my mate.”

The sentence echoes around the room that feels too big, too loud. I nearly stumble back in shock. Valentine holds me up, and my mate’s strength keeps me together for a little while longer. If they are mates, he will protect her no matter what. He’s not going to hurt her, and that’s why he was able to send his power to her and she was able to use it. That’s why she was completely covered in flames, because she was a dragon god’s mate. My daughter.

“She’s a child,” I say. “Even if she is your mate, she will not forgive you for taking her from her mother. From me. What are you going to tell her when she’s older? That you stole her from her mother, from her pack? That you stole her away and broke everyone’s hearts?”

“We are all that she knows,” Ragnar says. “It would hurt her, and if she is your mate, why would you want that? Don’t you want what is best for her?”

“Do you want her to grow up without a mother?”

His jaw ticks, and he looks down at her. “She doesn’t have a choice, and I don’t like doing this, despite what you may think. The Wolven gods are going to hunt me, and her, for the rest of her time. My city is hidden from them, and they won’t find us there. She will be able to exist in peace.”

“We can protect her,” Silas says, but in the back of my mind...I doubt it.

I can feel the slight doubt from Silas, too. He would try, so would I, but they are the Wolven gods. Their power...it felt

capable of destroying the world in the blink of an eye. And if Draycian is a threat to them, then how powerful must he be?

“I will not let them hurt her, but I need her in my city, where I can keep an eye on her and protect her, even if she doesn’t choose me as her mate. I will not force her,” he tells me, especially me. “In the end, it matters only that she’s safe. That is a mother’s job, correct?”

“You tricked me,” I bite out.

“Yes,” he replies, not a hint of guilt in his voice. “I knew the minute she was born into this world, but I couldn’t quite find her. The sword of the seven was blocking my powers. When I met you, I knew instantly that you’d had her. I wondered whether you just hid her away to keep her safe or simply didn’t want to be her mother. I knew that you’d bring her back eventually, or I hoped. The deal was there to make sure of it. I saw into the future and knew you’d meet her.”

My voice breaks. “Please...don’t take her. I can’t lose her.”

“A deal is a deal,” he replies, his jaw tight as tears fall down my cheeks. “The laws of magic are twisted. If you try to stop me from claiming the deal, magic will make you pay a heavy price. It might even hurt her.”

“You’re a fucking bastard, Draycian,” Silas growls. “Your mate is going to hate you for this.”

“So be it,” he shrugs. “She will be alive.”

We all go silent, and my heart cracks, cutting deep.

Breelyn and Callahan walk into the silent room, looking between us. Her concerned eyes find mine, Callahan’s too, and I shake my head softly.

We can’t fight this.

I don’t think we should.

From my mates’ silence, I think they agree. None of us want to say the words out loud. It would be so real.

“You called,” Breelyn says, her voice full of sarcasm.

He doesn't even look at her. "We're leaving. You still have time to play out our deal. The time here doesn't count."

"Bite me," she snaps and turns to Callahan, having a private moment that Draycian seems to let her have.

I look at my daughter and slowly walk across the room. Draycian doesn't move as I come up closer.

I brush some curls away from her cheek. "I think I knew, when her eyes turned to embers, that she was destined for a life I can't give her."

I look up at him. "But know, if you let her be harmed, there isn't any world you can hide in that I won't find you and kill you."

"I will always protect her," he claims. I hate that I believe him. Tears fill my eyes as I nod.

The second time my daughter is going to be taken from me, and both times, it's been to protect her. This time, I won't forget.

Draycian's voice is almost soft. "She will have a good life."

"With no family," I whisper. "With only old gods with a claim to her."

He doesn't say anything. "Let me come to your city and see her often. Please. She won't be alone that way and still safe."

"If you come too often, they will follow," he responds. "I cannot allow it."

"She needs her mother. She will need to know she is loved," I tell her. "And you are cold. You won't give her that."

I stroke her cheek one more time. "I know you don't think I'm much of a mother because I wasn't there all of the time, but I always loved her. I had no choice but to give her away, and I did it to protect her. I'm giving her to you to protect her; doesn't that say enough about how much I love her? She needs that love. She needs to know she isn't alone." My voice

cracks. “Don’t take that from her, Draycian. If no one teaches her to love, then she can never possibly love you.”

His voice is cold. “Once a year. There is a time when you cannot be followed. Just once, and you are not allowed to tell her about the deal. You will tell her that you wished for her to live in the city and not why.”

I nod, relief pouring into my bones even when it’s a deal with a tricky price of lying on top. It’s something. Anything. I won’t lose her completely.

“I’m coming with you,” Aunt Reine states, walking into the room, her heels clicking on the floor. She was clearly eavesdropping from outside. I look over at her, and it’s still hard after everything that happened with Erin, even if she did save the pack. Erin is still dead.

Draycian looks at her up and down. “You will not be able to leave my city. Ever.”

“I am aware, trickster,” she coldly responds.

“You will die there,” he warns her. “You will bow to me and only me.”

“And I will care for her,” she says sharply, looking at Dip. “She needs a female role model there all of the time.”

“Then welcome,” Draycian agrees.

My heart pounds as I feel Ragnar’s and Henderson’s hearts sadden. They won’t see their mother again. Maybe never. Reine walks to her sons and Silas and Valentine. I hear every word. “I was dragged back here when I wanted to leave, and this was the true reason. Let me go. I cannot be here any longer without him.”

“We understand, mum,” Ragnar says, his heart hurting more than it already was. I wipe my wet cheeks as Reine hugs them all.

I look at Draycian. “Can I hold her for a moment?”

“A minute,” Draycian replies, handing her to me. I hold her close and go to my mates. They circle around me as I say goodbye. For now. Not forever. Tears run down my cheeks as I

kiss her head and breathe in her scent one more time. My mates take their turn, lifting her hand, kissing her head gently. They know it's the right thing to do as much as I do, but it hurts. It hurts so much. Their voices fill my mind. "We have to do whatever we can to protect her, and she will come back to us one day."

"Her home is always going to be in Fall Mountain Pack."

Every step to Draycian, to hand over my daughter, feels like a sword in my back.

He looks me in the eye. "I was wrong. You are a very good mother."

"Protect her," I whisper, my voice breaking on a sob.

"Breelyn, come," Draycian calls as he turns and walks out, Aunt Reine nodding to me and leaving with him. I wish I got a moment to speak to her...but I know it's best this way. Callahan whispers words to a crying Breelyn, the necklaces around their necks flashing in the light. They are the same necklaces I wore as a spy. They will be able to speak to each other while they are apart.

Breelyn breaks away from Callahan and walks out. Draycian, Aunt Reine, Breelyn and my sweet Serendipity disappear in a flash of gold light.

My heart drops as I sink to the floor, bursting into tears.

My alphas hold me, all of them, in the moment of pure pain I feel cut through me. I know I did the right thing, but either way, it completely breaks my heart to let her go.

Epilogue

∞

11 YEARS LATER

11 YEARS LATER

WOLVES' howls echo behind me as I race straight through the forest, wet wind and leaves brushing through my fur. I spin around the corner, following the scents on the damp ground to exactly where I want to lead the wolves for chasing me. There's four of them out there. My wolves. I led them here, knowing they'd chase me anywhere. I skid around a corner of a tree and come out right before a stone throne, an old place that everyone knows is ours. I turn around, warm autumn leaves rushing into the air.

In my wake, four gigantic black wolves jump into the clearing, and I shift back in front of them, letting them stare at every inch of me as I rise up off the ground.

I can't help my smile.

Silas shifts back, kneeling before me. "I like when you kneel," I tell him.

He flashes me a wicked smirk. "I know."

My other mates shift back until all four of my alphas are in front of me, and I breathe in their scents. I hate being away from them, but this time, it's an exact twenty-four hours that I count down the days to. To the day I get with my beautiful daughter, once a year, and I get to see the amazing female she is growing into. I guess part of me always feared how much of her father might be in her, but like Jesper, she is good and kind, and that darkness is only a shadow I see in the corner of her eyes. In Jesper's too.

"We've missed you," Henderson growls, stepping forward. All thoughts of yesterday disappear as I face my mates, and my body clenches.

I tilt my head to the side. "What are you going to do about it?"

Valentine answers, walking across the clearing. He falls to his knees before me. “Bow to our queen.”

Before I can blink, his warm lips press against my bare core, and I gasp. He groans. “You smell divine. I know you will taste like heaven. Are you ready, Mai?”

“For you?” I murmur, digging my hands into his hair. I tug on his hair so he looks up at me, a smile on my lips just as wicked as any Silas does. “Always.”

His growl sends shivers through me as he goes back to my core and parts my thighs before licking my clit, my echoing cry shaking the surrounding trees as he drags me down off my knees to lie back.

Silas and Ragnar watch, silent but hard as they stroke their cocks. Henderson moves to our side, kissing me deeply as Valentine takes less than a few minutes to lick me into an orgasm. My body is shaking with pleasure as Valentine flips me over, taking me in his favourite position and thrusting deep within me.

His growl shakes the leaves on the ground around us.

My tender nipples brush against the leaves with every thrust, and it reminds me why I love making love to my mates in our forest.

Henderson kneels in front of me, and I open my mouth for him. His eyes flash. “Good queen.”

I would smile, but his cock slides into my mouth, and I moan around him.

Silas and Ragnar kneel either side of me, all of our moans and groans echoing. I feel another orgasm rising just as Valentine starts to thicken, Henderson alongside him. Our mating bond lets us feel each other’s pleasure, and at the same time, we all crash into our finish. I barely feel anything but the pleasure as Valentine picks me up and holds me on his lap, our breathless pants filling the brisk air.

This is a routine for us. A chase through the forest, a mating, and then we talk. Ragnar and Silas grab the clothes we have stashed here, and we all get changed. Once I’m in my

soft shirt, leggings, and boots, I sit tucked up to Ragnar, with Silas building a small fire to keep us warm. Valentine grabs wood and various things he needs while Henderson gets us some drinks out of the storage box we keep here.

I sip on the flavoured water, enjoying the warm buzz of the fire.

“How is Serendipity?” Ragnar questions, running his gaze over me, searching for any sign that I’m not okay. In the first few years after I let Serendipity go to live with Draycian, visiting was torture. I wanted to take her away, never leave her side again, and she was slowly forgetting who I was to her. It was harder because Niall wasn’t speaking to me, not after what happened, as he thought I’d made a mistake. I understood his anger, but it made everything so hard to process. I’d cry for days when I came back, and my mates held me the entire time. Seraphim and Breelyn came in one day, after the third year of visiting, and told me enough is enough. That Serendipity was happy and safe, that she was alive, and that should be something to celebrate. They kicked my ass in training, got me drunk and reminded me that one day, Serendipity will come back to us. It helps that Aunt Reine tells me she is doing well and is a very happy child, at least she did. I haven’t seen Aunt Reine in a few years, but Dip says she is well, in the strange accent that she has now that must come from the city she lives in. The city I’m never allowed to see. Dip comes with a male, who claims to be her guard, and we stay in a small house in a dark cave. “Serendipity is fine, nothing unusual except she has learnt sarcasm, and she is a little bossy, but I guess that is normal for thirteen-year-olds,” I chuckle, and they smile with me, albeit sadly. I open my mind and show them the memory of her.

The gold light flashes away, revealing a gold-walled cavern and a small fire burning within the centre, in a metal sphere structure. There are two beds, a cabinet and food in the boxes in front of it. The same as always. The gold light flashes once more, and this time, two people walk out of it.

But there is only one I care about.

Serendipity.

She is even more beautiful than I remember her, all dark golden locks of hair and bright green eyes. Her hair is longer, down to her waist now, and she has her fringe braided back on either side. A floor-length red dress shimmers as she runs to me, arms stretched wide. I catch her and hug her tightly, breathing in her scent as her male guard moves to stand by the wall. A spy for Draycian, no doubt.

The bastard.

The only thing that makes me not curse his name to the wind is that I never scented him on her. Never. Maybe he isn't involved in her upbringing.

"I've missed you, mama," she tells me, holding me longer than usual. I let her hug me for as long as she needs, because I always need more. I will always want more time with her.

I let the memory fade. Everything else can be shown later, and it hurts to think about her already, knowing it's going to be a year before I get to see her again.

"I'm happy to see her so healthy and well," Henderson says, but there is that hint of sadness in his voice, that we didn't get to bring her up. Couldn't.

She is happy, healthy and safe. I shouldn't worry, but there's something in her eyes that always makes me worry. A spark of something. She knows the dragon god is her mate, but other than that, she's not allowed to talk to me about him. I've never seen him since that day he walked out with her, back to his city. He always sends a golden wolf to take me to a cave outside the pack borders. Instead of worrying my mates with this, and they already know, I tell them all about the paintings she showed me that she did.

"She's significantly better than she was when she was four years old," I tell them out loud, needing to hear a sound other than the fire. Dip was very skilled at painting from about seven, but now her paintings are nothing short of masterpieces.

"Does she like the magical blades that I sent with you?" Valentine questions. They worked on the knives for months of this year, getting the magic just right so that they can sense

danger to her alone, if she is going to be hurt or someone is going to kill her. I hope it gives her some warning if anyone dares to touch her.

I know Draycian would kill anyone who did, but a backup isn't a terrible thing.

I nod with a small but sad smile.

“Do they even train her to fight?” Silas ponders.

“Apparently so. She seemed quite familiar with it when I gave it to her, held them in a way only someone trained could,” I respond. I won't mention that she threw one of them across the cavern, and it narrowly missed the side of her guard's ear.

He simply stayed still, no reaction, no nothing. Dip just laughed.

“She said it was a great birthday present either way,” I finish off. We don't get to see her on her birthday, but we take present anyway, and Christmas ones too.

“Even the book?” Silas questions, meaning the book Ragnar gifted her on advanced human mechanics that he borrowed from the humans on our last visit to the America lands. I was glad the book didn't get lost in the new garages built in the city, which Ragnar has filled with cars and car parts. Enough to last him several lifetimes. We go once a year, or send Callahan, Breelyn or Seraphim, to what is left of the human lands to make trade deals and to open up our boundaries now that the Levi are gone. But humans don't trust easily, and our treaty with them is precarious at best, at worst one inch away from war. None of us want a war again, not after the last, not after how many dead we had. The humans don't like wolves or magic of any kind, and angels are actively hunted. Most of America is now divided into what we call cults, but they call them sections. It's not a great place to be, but we all need to trade with each other to survive.

To have a future, we need to open the metaphorical gates.

We did a lot of that, helping Deimos and Niall in building five new cities across the world, all a mixture of all races that

live within them and rule themselves. There is a new king ruling over the Styx, chosen by Niall himself after we made up and he decided to come and live here. He even has a young daughter and beautiful mate, who live in the castle with us. It's certainly big enough.

As for me and my alphas, it took a long time to get our pack back to a sense of normal, or at least a bit of normal before the war that will always haunt our souls. We honour the dead by living, though, and that's what I've told many, many wolves over the years. We lost a lot of people that day, but they aren't forgotten, and they never will be.

Silas and Ragnar are bickering over the mechanics book as I look over at Valentine, and he softly smiles at me.

I reach into his mind. "How is your cousin?"

I know he goes to see him when I leave to see Serendipity, mostly to keep himself busy and a little in part to make sure I don't go with him. He doesn't want me around his cousin after how we met, and I'm not rushing to go with him. His cousin has stopped drinking after the war, and Valentine will never forgive him completely, but he is family.

"We had a meal. He is courting a female," he tells me, speaking out loud over the argument.

"Good," I tell him. We continue talking for a bit longer as the fire burns into embers before we shift and run back up to the castle over the lovely grassy fields, past the ruins of the old houses that were destroyed in the war. None of us have decided to rebuild them, not yet anyway. We run straight into the castle doors, and right in the doorway stands a little boy.

Our little boy.

Who always misses me as much as I miss him when I go to see his sister. He wants to meet her and protect her as a brother would do, but we struggle to explain why he can't. One day. One day, they will meet.

I shift back, dropping the clothes in my mouth on the floor and pulling them back on me before going over and picking up

my beautiful son. I spin him around, making him giggle, and I tuck his dark curls behind his ear.

Seraphim leans against the door, smiling at me. “He always knows when you’re back, and you’re lucky I guessed where he went as I’m too fat to chase him now.”

She pats her large bump of a stomach. I look down at my son. “Have you been causing Auntie Seraphim trouble, Kendric?”

He gives me a toothy grin, even missing a tooth that he lost last week biting into an apple. He cried for an hour straight until Silas explained that a missing tooth makes him a wolf warrior, and gave him another sharp dagger—which I hid later with the rest of them. I look at my sister as my mates walk over, finished getting changed. “Thank you.”

She laughs. “I’m going to get my mate to rub my swollen feet until I feel better, and don’t expect to see me for the night.”

“Say hello from me!” I shout as she waddles away. That baby is due any day, and I can’t wait to be an auntie. None of us expected Seraphim to come out with the shocking news that she was pregnant, over a normal breakfast, right between a conversation over a new training building and whether Jesper was old enough to train with our army, which he wants to join. We all scented it when she walked in, and that was enough to silence the conversation for me at least. Apparently, she met a male wolf in the America lands, and that was that. I didn’t even know she liked males...but she told me one night that she liked him. Just him and that other males are still useless to her. But he didn’t want to have anything to do with Phim the next morning. It was a one-night stand.

Three months later, she found her mate. A beautiful female wolf healer who came for an audience with us to discuss new healing techniques after she was prompted to the head healer for one of the plazas. They found out they were true mates that night. Her mate was delighted to hear about the pregnancy, and they plan to bring the baby up together in the castle. I know my sister is healing from deep wounds, from the first

baby she had sadly lost. This is the right thing for her, and I know she's happy. Her fears will fade when she holds her child.

"Five years old and you're already stealing my mate," Silas playfully grumbles, poking at Kendric's stomach, and he giggles louder.

"My mama," he replies, holding my neck tightly. He's lucky he is so gorgeous. I tickle him as we head inside to the warmth as winter slowly creeps up, chilling the air.

"Dadda, when do I get to shift?" he asks Henderson as Ragnar and Valentine close the doors. He asks this question every day now, and my mates believe it's his awareness of his wolf that is prompting the questions. Silas swoops him out of my arms and spins him around in the air.

"Soon, son," Henderson says and kisses the top of his head.

"I want to run with you," he tells us. He speaks so well for a young one.

"You'll never be able to run as fast as us," Ragnar challenges. Ragnar sprints down the castle, much slower than he can actually run.

Kendric wiggles out of Silas's arms and starts running after him. "I can!"

Henderson runs after them both, chuckling.

The castle walls groan, but I know the castle secretly loves having so many children running about. It's alive with joy.

Valentine kisses the top of my head. "I'm going to have a shower. Join me?"

The promise in his words makes me shiver.

"I—" Silas starts, but Callahan's voice interrupts.

"Do you want to say goodbye to us before you disappear for the night?"

I turn to look down the corridor as Callahan and Breelyn walk down to us, their beautiful little girl holding hands

between them, her black wings ruffling in the air. She's half wolf, half angel. But she's all angel in our eyes because she looks exactly like Callahan, except for the wings being so dark. Callahan picks his daughter up as she reaches for me, helping her. She's only two and a half years old, and I'm definitely the favourite auntie.

I press kisses all over her cheeks. "Are you excited, Frida?"

She nods. "Come, too?"

I shake my head. "Not this time. You'll have fun with your mum and dad though. I'm sure King Deimos will make a fuss. He always does when anyone comes to visit."

I know they're travelling to the Fenrir Kingdom today, taking a few things from us but mostly for a holiday, which is what Deimos's kingdom is well-known for. The Fenrir Kingdom, renamed by King Deimos, is nicknamed the pleasure world.

"I can't wait to take her to the beach," Breelyn tells me, taking Frida from my arms.

"I think you'll love it," I reply with a smile.

"How did it go?" Callahan questions, his voice kind.

"Normal," I reply. There isn't much else to say, but I appreciate that he and Breelyn came to check on me before they left.

"Enjoy yourselves," Silas says, patting Callahan's shoulder and smiling at Breelyn.

"Are you going to come back with another surprise this time?" Valentine questions, eyeing the toddler, who was the surprise they came back with from a previous trip.

"I will try my best," Callahan teases.

Breelyn's cheeks burn as she gently whacks his arm. "Let's go before I change my mind."

"I love you too, my little wolf," he tells her.

She winks at him, and they head out the doors.

I rest my head on Silas's shoulder, watching Callahan fly his family into the skies, the sun setting above our pack.

There was once a rejected wolf...

And she became the queen of the wolves.

The End.

[Want to read Serendipity's story?](#)

Description

**I was trained to be the dragon king's mate. His pure,
blessed by the gods, fire queen.**

But my fate was never to be his.

My name is Serendipity Fall, and I'm one of the only wolf shifters living with a bunch of immortal dragon shifters in a city I can never leave. I'm the fated mate of the dragon king—Dracyan of the house of Mnemosyne—and on the first full moon after my nineteenth birthday, I will be bound to him in a mating ceremony.

But I don't want a mate.

I don't want the dragon king god who rules my hometown from his golden castle. I don't even know what he looks like. All I know is, anytime I mention his name, everyone blanches in fear.

He is a monster.

I have a plan to escape from his city and find my real family.
To be free.

I won't be his fire queen, because in the darkness of the embers, I found him:

The dark wolf I crave.

We will be together, even if our love is going to destroy everything.

Even if it brings the Wolven gods down upon us all.

Prologue

L

ARAWN OF THE VANIR.

“THERE WILL COME A DAY, torturer of the Vanir, that you will regret this.”

My words echo around the dark walls of my new prison. The only other sound is the dripping water down the wall and the squeaks of the rats running into their holes. I know I will be here a very, very long time.

Time is nothing in the flames.

His gold hair shines like our creator as he steps into the light, looking down on me. He has always looked down on me like dirt. He looks down on everyone who wasn't her.

Or his dead betrothed.

How sad that was, when her blood spilled on my hands right before I turned her to ash. I smile at him, at the memories.

“I will not kill you, Arawn of the house of Mnemosyne, as rotting in here is a suitable punishment for what you have done,” he growls, embers flickering out of his lips. His body shakes, the only sign I've truly destroyed him by killing her. By killing all of his family and everyone he has ever loved.

I rise, smirking in the darkness. “I will be freed, and you will never, ever escape me. This is temporary.”

“May the Wolven gods find you,” he curses me, his eyes flashing gold. “Because no one else in this world is ever going to help you escape.”

I watch as he walks away, his gold wings spreading out before he takes off, and the room goes dark. No matter where he hides, I will find him.

I curl myself into the embers in my soul, letting the room burn with my fire until I can only see flames. In the flames, I see a female wolf with a coat of ice-cold snow and a fiery heart that could burn even the coldest winter into summer.

One day she will free me.

Together, we are going to turn this world into nothing but ash and ice.

Seventeen



A GLIMMERING GOLD blade presses against the soft skin of my neck, and I grin. “Should I be impressed that your immortal old ass actually won this time?”

Nakoa growls as he lowers his blade, and I turn to face him. Nakoa is my guard, promised to the old gods themselves to protect me from any threat, which according to him, is my own clumsiness more than anything else. He might be right. In every aspect except this. I’m good in a fight. Usually. Sweat pours down my back, my forehead, and literally everywhere as I pick up my dust-covered sword my guard knocked from my hand. The gold metal glistens in the daylight shining in from high above the city, highlighting every bit of silver, gold and diamond crystals littered around the tops of the buildings. When I was a kid, I thought they were stars. I soon learnt that the real stars are in the sky outside—somewhere I will never be able to go if *he* gets his way.

“Coming from the pure, blessed by the gods, fire queen, who always leaves her right side open and therefore would die if a real enemy attacked,” Nakoa replies. Cocky immortal dragon shifter.

Pure.

Blessed by the gods.

The dragon king’s fated mate.

I hate every single one of those titles, and he knows it. They control my life and make every action of mine heavily judged. I just want to be free. I want to see the stars, breathe

the fresh air and find out what the world is really like. If Nakoa can see the betraying thoughts going through my mind, he doesn't comment on it. "Talk to me, Serendipity."

"You only use my full name when I'm in trouble," I counter, and he laughs. Nakoa is my best friend, even if he would deny it.

I look up at the sunlight, watching how it highlights everything in our city. The city of Mnemosyne. Hidden away from the world, with me locked in here with it. The cavern ceiling is tall, suggesting we are inside an enormous mountain, and it has hundreds of large and small holes that pour in the sunlight. The spiralling tower buildings stretch up from the slums of the city, like diamond pillars with the mirrors lining the sandstone to reflect light.

The city is beautiful in the day, but it's not when the city is at its best. This isn't my favourite time to view it. It's at night, when the stars hang high above the sky like beams of light, shining silver beams down onto the buildings, reflecting their silver light everywhere. Every building, house and structure was designed to make the most of the starlight, and it is my favourite part of my home. *The city that burns starlight.*

"I love my home, Nakoa, but...I want to know what is out there," I whisper.

Nakoa places his large hand on my shoulder, and I look up into his dark, mud brown eyes. Nakoa is a handsome shifter. There is no doubt about it, with his tanned skin, muscular form, and long black hair that is shiny even in the darkest of rooms. I remember Nakoa always training me, teaching me to fight, looking after me. He's not the only one in my life, but he's my best friend, and I know I wouldn't be the person I am without his guidance. Once, a few years ago, I realised I had a crush on him, but I soon realised that he wasn't going to feel that way about me, so I pushed those feelings down as far as I could. The dragon shifters are waiting for their mates, and they don't date; they don't do anything but exist.

Personally, I think it's a giant waste. A city full of sexy dragon shifters with no females to claim as their own.

“Death is out there. It waits for you, Serei,” he gently replies. “It’s not... The people out there are not like us. We live in peace.”

“My mama—”

“Yes, but she is the queen of millions of wolves. Don’t think that one day a year really gives you a good look into her life. There is a reason you are here,” he tells me. I shake my head, but he steps in front of me, placing his hands on my shoulders. “I know you have a million questions, like any normal nineteen-year-old would have, but just wait a little longer. Our king will tell you everything.”

I resist the urge to pull a face at the affection in his tone for his king. I glance at the castle that is at the top of the city, looking over all of us with its tall glass windows and dauntingly high towers. *Home sweet home.*

It’s also *his* home. The dragon king...my fated mate and the male I’ve never met. At least I can’t remember meeting. Aunt Reine and Nakoia claim I did meet him when I was a young child and that he saved my life.

Before stealing me from my mother and leaving me in this city while he disappeared off to the old gods know where.

“This is all about the ceremony tomorrow, isn’t it?”

“You’re excited, but I am not. I am—” I pause, looking for the right word. “Frightened, Nakoia. I don’t know him.”

He smiles at me. “Serei, you are wild and fierce and powerful in ways you don’t even know yet. You face the males in this city with your head held high, when most people would fear a thousand-odd male dragon shifters. You’ve always been so brave, taking no shit from anyone. Tomorrow will be no different.”

“They are all big teddy bears,” I say, waving off his grip and walking to the edge of the sandpit we use for training.

Nakoia laughs deeply. “I’ll tell Aedh and Morcant that, shall I?”

I roll my eyes, but my lips twitch. Aedh and Morcant are the biggest males I've ever met, twins, and they are built like rocks. With scary attitudes to boot.

We go silent as I watch my home. I do love this place despite my fears about the ceremony tomorrow. I've known about the ceremony since Aunt Reine told me on my eighth birthday. I'm the fated mate of the dragon king—Draycian of the house of Mnemosyne—and on the first full moon after my nineteenth birthday, I will be bound to him in a mating ceremony. What I didn't realise at eight was, when I got older...I'd want a choice.

I don't care what the old gods chose for me. I don't care that he has waited thousands of years to find me.

I just want to make my own choice.

"He's a good male, and you are both well suited, in my opinion," Nakoia claims. "Stubborn and, well, more stubborn. Perfect match."

"Asshole."

"Language," he replies with a smirk.

"Now you sound like Aunt Reine," I tease, and he knocks my shoulder with his, making his necklace bounce, the fire-red symbol catching my eye. Nakoia can say whatever he likes, but I've never met this dragon king, and I have absolutely no interest in becoming his mate tomorrow.

"You told me once that Mnemosyne was a goddess, and on her deathbed, she unleashed her magic into the world to make the first dragon shifter," I say.

Nakoia nods. "Yes. I am one of the youngest shifters, as you know, but that is in our history books. You'd know more if you read those over the books your mum brings you."

"Mama has taste and brings me fantasy books," I reply. "Fantasy is just what I need to escape sometimes."

"Why did you ask about our goddess?"

"I want to know something. Why I would be destined for a dragon shifter when I'm a full-blooded wolf?" I hedge. "Why

me?”

And how do I get out of it?

“Fate wove our stories before we ever existed, Serei,” he softly replies. “You can’t fight it.”

Like hell I can’t.

I lift my sword up in the air. “Come on. I’m bored and we have another two hours until the sun sets.”

“No,” Nakoa firmly replies. “You have a big day to get ready for tomorrow, and I promised Reine that I’d send you back early. I don’t want to get in her bad books, not even for you, Serei.”

I pout. “There is no way I’m going to be able to convince you, is there?”

He winks at me. “Your Aunt Reine is more frightening than you.”

I chuckle. *Yes. Yes, she is.*

Aunt Reine is the mother of two of my mama’s mates, and an aunt to her growing up. When I came to live here, she came too. Aunt Reine told me that a city full of stubborn, immortal dragon shifters wasn’t all that different from her old pack. That male shifters are the same, be it dragons or wolves.

Somehow, she has all these mighty dragon shifters doing her bidding. It likely has to do with the fact she and I are the only females in the city. There used to be two older females who lived here, but they died when I was young. Other than Breelyn, my godmother who visited for a year when I was a child, it’s always been just Aunt Reine and me.

“I’m half tempted to go and hide in the city just so you get in trouble,” I reply, making him laugh.

“I’d find you. I always do,” Nakoa replies. He might be cool, but he is still an overprotective male at heart. I put my sword back on the metal holder with the other weapons and pull on my brown leather boots. My dark red dress falls to my lower knees, cut at the sides for easy movement and stitched with gold thread. It shimmers in the light when I move, and it

has the brilliant magical ability to block any attack. All my clothes are made of the same material and created by Torrix. He has amazing design skills, though it took me years of begging to convince him to make me some leggings and tops. *The dragon king's mate should only wear dresses*, he used to say, until I proved him wrong. Or annoyed him enough to give in.

I quickly retie the end of my braid, which has come loose, and push it over my shoulder where it falls to the middle of my back. Strings of gold are braided into my hair, gifts from Nakoa for my birthdays over the years. Each thin string of gold is meant to give me luck. He said it was an old tradition of the dragons.

Grabbing my gold cloak, I pull it around my shoulders and brush off some of the sand on my dress before heading back up the path to where Nakoa is waiting for me. I eye his red and black leather laced with gold string. I want to wear leather one day.

“So, when are you heading out?” I question. Nakoa leaves the city once every few months, and I don’t get to know what he does, but he always comes back with something new for me. “Because...some of that lovely vermilion paint would be appreciated.”

He looks down at me. “With the mating ceremony tomorrow, I won’t be leaving anytime soon. We will need to be on guard more than ever before.”

“Why?”

He looks away from me. “It’s best King Draycian explains this to you.”

I wave as we pass seven shifters doing run drills around the edges of the city, and they all incline their head back to me before running past and down the steps. The sand-covered stairs eventually flatten into a space right under the gold archway made of two dragon tails wrapped around each other in the middle. The heads of the dragons lie at either side of the stairs, their giant wings spreading out across the stone cliff. I

touch the head of the gold dragon on the left, like I always do, and Nakoa smiles at me.

Despite this being a city full of dragon shifters, I rarely see them actually fully shift. Most of them prefer to shift their golden wings to make it easy to travel around the city, but I know they can fully shift their entire bodies into dragons that are the size of a building. They can also change their forms into any animal they have met, and most prefer to change into wolves when they are around me. I've always guessed it's their way of trying to make me feel better and to give my wolf a pack.

But I'm a white wolf in a pack of gold.

I will always stand out.

We wind through the silver stone streets, past the sandstone houses that shimmer in the light so brightly it hurts my eyes at times. The city is silent, as usual, and I wave at a few males in the windows as I pass. I know them all, mostly, but many don't speak to me. Nakoa explained it isn't that they don't like me, but they know I belong to their king, and they don't dare anger him.

We pass through the triple silver gates, the entrance to the castle, which are left open, until we come to the larger gate right in front of the towering castle.

"Fire to you, Miss Serendipity and Guard Nakoa," Vercintx greets, bowing low. Vercintx is very old but still as handsome as any male I've seen. His hair is white, clipped back with a gold clip shaped like a bird. He wears the traditional leathers like Nakoa, but unlike Nakoa, he speaks to me only like a queen on a throne and not a real person.

"How are you, Vercintx?" I question with a kind smile.

He starts opening the lock on the gate. "You need not worry yourself with my needs, Miss Serendipity. Have a fire blessed evening."

"Fire to you," I say, inclining my head in respect. *Fire to you.* The ancient saying of respect for the dragon shifters has never made much sense to me.

“I will be back tonight, Serei,” Nakoa tells me. “Don’t piss your aunt off too much.”

I flash him a wickedly sweet smile. “Why would I ever do that?”

He sighs as I waggle my fingers at him and head through the gate to open the wooden door to the entrance hall. My home always smells like a mixture of delicious food and jasmine, thanks to the jasmine plants climbing the walls in nearly every corridor. The warmth of the castle settles into my blood as I close the door behind me. Dumping my cloak and boots in the entrance hall by the storage box, I follow the amazing smell of food until I find myself in the kitchen. Aunt Reine is leaning over a pot of something that smells delicious, maybe chicken stew, and she looks over her shoulder as I step into the room.

Aunt Reine is older than I am, but very young to the immortal shifters in this city. In looks, she would pass as a thirty-year-old human, with her midnight black hair and stormy eyes, if it weren’t for the supernatural glow in her eyes, her swift movements and how beautiful she is along with the moon marks on her forehead. My mama has similar markings. I wonder if Reine’s two sons look like their mother. Reine’s sons and two others are my mama’s mates. I can’t remember them, but I feel like I know them from their gifts, letters and stories I have been told. I often wonder if my little brother looks like me or them. I know none of them are my biological father because he is dead, which is the most anyone has ever told me, except apparently, I have an uncle from my father’s side—Jesper Ravensword. But no one else.

I hope to meet him one day too.

“You smell like sweat and dragons,” she states in place of a greeting. There is a smile on her face as she says it, and while I might not be the pure fire queen that this city wants me to be, I know I’m enough. Reine tells me about it every time I falter. She reminds me that I come from a powerful line of wolves, and no matter what my fate is, I choose the ending.

It’s one of the reasons I love her so much.

“You smell like chicken stew,” I say, walking to her side and attempting to steal the spoon for a taste, but she bats me away.

“Get away, you,” she shoos. “You’re not eating until you’re in a new dress and had a bath. Plus, it is not ready yet.”

“Fine, fine,” I say, feeling a little tired. I eye the comfy chair by the fireplace and sit down, picking at the worn orange fabric, remembering every little part of the fairy-tale stories Aunt Reine told me on this chair. She told me stories of the pack, of wolves, of her dead mate and of my mother, but it was always the fairy-tale parts without the real truth.

No one tells me the truth, because they treat me like I couldn’t handle it.

“How was training with Nakoa?”

I turn to look at Aunt Reine as she wipes her hands on a towel, and I answer, “I still need to work on my defence. He got me this time. Again. I know for certain he has been going easy on me until this last year.”

“He is still going easy on you, sweetheart,” Aunt Reine says with a frown. “I saw the dragons, as wolves, rip through angels on a battlefield. He is a warrior, and you don’t ever want to feel the full force of him attacking you.”

“You never talk about the war...,” I gently start. “You came here after it was over, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” she replies, looking down. Looking submissive in a way I’ve rarely seen her. “I did what I had to for my people... but sometimes you can’t face your home when the dust settles and the moment is over.”

My heart races. “Will you ever go back?”

She looks at the plants on the window sill, at the new exotic bright pink flowers that I don’t know the name of. “Yes. When you need me no more and it is the right time.”

“After tomorrow, that might be sooner than you think,” I say, turning away from her as my heart clenches along with my hands. I dig my nails into the armchair.

“Are you ready for tomorrow, Serei?”

Her question echoes in the room. Aunt Reine doesn't often talk to me about the ceremony, but every time she does, I can see it: the look in her eyes, the disagreement. But she never voices it. Never steps in to save me.

I look away into the dark flames flickering inside the fireplace. Every secret I've got is hidden within these flames, and even if she won't save me, I will save myself with someone else's help. *My secret.*

This is the only fireplace in the entire building because somehow my home keeps itself warm. But this room, these kitchens, they allow this fire to burn all day and night. The dragon shifters breathe fire, but oddly enough, they don't have any fires lit anywhere else.

“Of course I'm not ready. I've told you more than once that I don't want to do it,” I tell her, but she isn't looking at me anymore.

She rests her hands on the countertop. “Serei—”

“Don't say ‘This is your fate, and you will feel better soon,’” I interrupt. “If you were being forced into a mating ceremony with some stranger, you'd fight it too!”

I blow out an angry breath, and she comes over to me. Aunt Reine pulls one of the wooden chairs over from the table and sits opposite me, leaning back in the seat and crossing her long legs. “I met my fated mate and lost him. I saw him killed in front of me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. Now half of my soul is gone, because that is what a fated mate is. Your soul mate. A part of you no one else could ever be. Give him a chance, Serei. I am not a fan of his or sworn to protect him, but I cannot deny what the old gods have chosen for you. You are his and he is yours.”

“I do not want him,” I bite out, a low growl escaping my throat. “When do I get to choose?”

“Serei—”

I get up, ignoring her, and walk to the door.

“He protected you from everything.”

“I never asked him too,” I remind her before I leave the room, suddenly not hungry at all. I might be selfish to say that, but I shouldn’t owe this dragon my entire life because he decided to step in and save me. I don’t even know how he saved me, considering no one will talk about it.

I head up the spiral staircase to my room, closing the oak door behind me. My room is quite spacious, circular, with a large oval bed in the middle, but at this moment it feels like a tiny prison. Beautiful gold sheets cover the bed, matching the wallpaper with jasmine flowers. All of it so pretty and perfect. *Like they want me to be.* The ceiling is pure sandstone, smoothed into circular shapes, with a diamond chandelier hanging in the centre. There’s a small bathroom to the one side, and an area filled with canvas, with hundreds of my paintings looking back at me. A big portion of them are of eyes in the flames.

My last hope.

My secret in the dark, who has whispered to me for years. I don’t care what Aunt Reine and Nakoa say. I am not becoming the dragon king’s mate tomorrow. I pick up the nearest canvas and run my fingers over the glowing black eyes in the flames, my heart racing. This is the way I’m going to escape my fate. This is how I’m going to escape him.

The dragon king.

Eighteen

8

NAKOA OF THE HOUSE OF MNEMOSYNE

I SPREAD MY WINGS OUT, gliding easily over the city. Over my home, one I know so well. Anytime I leave the city, leave her, I miss it. I hope Serei will see some of the incredible world after tomorrow. The vibrant cities that are full of wolves, humans, and angels. The beaches, the oceans, and forests. She deserves to see it all.

Even if it's not with me.

I land in the middle of the main street, near the many small shops within the old stone buildings. Most sell weapons, food, or drinks—the three main things any dragon shifter could want. Many of my brothers are walking around, returning to their homes as I sense the sun setting above us, while others, like me, are heading into their favourite pub for a drink. Most of my brothers keep to themselves and have done since I've known them. As the youngest one born to the dragons, I don't have the deep connections many of them do to others. I'm an outsider, but I like it that way at times. Especially with my position as Serei's guard and so many of the shifters interested in what their queen is like. I've let one too many people close, and I am still struggling to figure out how to deal with it.

I head into the rugged pub in front of me, a sign post hanging outside with the list of special drinks they have on tonight. The pub is nearly empty, a few males sitting at various tables in the shadows, but the bar has no one else sitting at it. Perfect. I head straight up to the counter, sit on an old stool, and nod at the barkeeper, Aedh. Aedh and his brother,

Morcant, run this pub and can drink anyone under the bar. I've learnt that the bad way.

He quickly brings me over my favourite drink, and I slide some gold coins across the bar to him. Aedh picks up the coins and pockets them. "How is our queen today?"

"Nervous," I tell him. There isn't any point hiding it. Many watch our morning and afternoon practices, and they all know she is out of her game recently. Usually there are bets on how quickly she learns certain moves and how quickly she will give up. When she finds out about those bets, she will make them all regret doing the bets at all.

"Shame that. She will soon be fine, and send her my well wishes," he tells me, nodding my way and leaving me to it. I want to tell him that she is going to be fine, but I'm falling apart day by day, knowing that she's got to go and mate with someone else tomorrow. Every time I see her beautiful green eyes, my heart stops straight and I can't think. Her scent has me hard in moments, ever since last year, and it only gets worse with every day that passes. My trips out of the city don't help, and I can't focus on anything but her.

She is my best friend, a female I would die for, and I am in love with her.

How to mess up your guard job: fall in love with the queen. Check.

"You must be excited that the king is finally mating," Aedh states as I take a long drink of the whiskey, an old brand I've enjoyed for years, and let it burn my throat. "Perhaps then we can all find our own females. I want a family, and I suspect many do."

"Yes, we do," Apollon agrees, moving to sit on the stool at my side and patting my back. "My normal, friend."

"Good to see you," Aedh tells him, turning to make his drink.

Apollon takes one look at me and sighs. He knows what is on my mind, and there isn't any point in hiding it from him. He has been my friend for too long and knows me better.

Apollon first guessed when he found me drunk in the middle of the street and helped me home, and after he threw water on my face, I told him everything. I expected to wake up in the prisons under the castle, but instead, Apollon sorted me out a coffee and never asked me about it again unless I brought it up. Apollon is one of the king's five personal guards, and they live in the castle with the king. In battle, he is lethal, and he has taught me much.

Aedh passes him his drink. "On the house."

"Fucker, his is free and not mine?" I question with a low chuckle.

He laughs. "When you're promoted to a personal guard, then you get a free drink."

Apollon smirks and takes a long drink. "Fire to you, Aedh."

He inclines his head before leaving to serve someone else at the other end of the bar. I pick up my whiskey, taking a long sip, hoping the burn will block out some of the pain in my chest. "You look like shit, mate."

I glance over at him, his white hair perfect, and there isn't a stain on his uniform. "You don't."

"You know what I am implying, Nakoa," he quietly states. "Have you found a way to deal with it yet?"

I know he means the crush on Serei, which has developed into more than a crush; it's a full-blown issue where she has taken my heart unknowingly and I'm in serious shit. Having pressed against her today, holding that knife to her throat was torture. But every training session is, and sometimes I can't focus on anything but the sweat gliding down her neck.

Fuck.

It's more torture to lie to her and say nothing so I don't fuck up her future. She'll be happy. I keep telling myself it as I continue to drink.

She will be happy, even if it's going to destroy me. I've worked out it's better to just have her close, and if I tell her the

truth, there is every chance I'll fuck up the friendship and she won't speak to me again.

"No," I eventually reply. I don't have a long, detailed answer for him. He's loyal to the dragon king first, like we all are, but what he doesn't know won't kill him. The king would kill me if he knew how I felt about his queen, his intended mate.

"Have you thought more about my offer?" he questions. His tone is kind but firm, because he believes his offer is the best solution to my problem. He wants me to go and work in the pack lands, with Serei's mother, and be a spy of sorts. One the queen would know is there, though. "It'll get you out of the city and away from her."

He speaks so quietly that I barely pick it up, but no one else would be able to hear what he said. Working on speaking quietly is something we have all gotten used to after living in a city full of eavesdropping dragon shifters that can hear for miles.

And have boring lives.

"I have thought about it, but I don't know that leaving would be great for her right now. She's in a strange place," I say. *Strange place* is an understatement of how she is at the moment. I know it's nerves, and I wish I could explain it's just a blood binding and then she will have more freedom.

But I don't know the king all that well.

I can't promise her anything, but I can stay. I can be her friend when she needs me, no matter how much it tears me apart inside.

"Sometimes you must place yourself first. If you break yourself to fix her, what will be left of you?"

"I forget how old you are until you say shit like that," I say.

He laughs. "You're right. So am I, though."

I grunt before I continue to drink my whiskey until it's all gone. I'm tempted to order more and get so drunk that I barely

remember going home. That way, I barely have seconds to think about her before I pass out in my bed.

The only reason I don't buy the bottle of whiskey is that she needs me tomorrow.

"You must not interfere," Apollon quietly reminds me. "The king...I would not be able to intervene even though you are my friend."

I push my empty glass away. "I have no intention of interfering."

Apollon searches my eyes, seeing what he needs and believing me because it's true. I won't ruin this for her.

I want her to be queen, to have the world at her fingertips and be protected from the cruelty of the world. The king can offer her that, and I can't.

"You could be so much more, Nakoa. You're smart, a damn good fighter, and you did a good job guarding her and training her," he states, clutching his drink. "You could be a king's guard one day. You have the skills."

"Thanks, mate," I tell him.

"Don't let this ruin you," he tells me. "Your mate will come, and you won't even look at the queen again."

A part of me wishes that were true, but I couldn't imagine feeling even an inch about someone else like I do her. I never saw her as anything other than a friend until she turned eighteen, and then it was like a fire began to burn. Her scent wrapped around my soul. My dragon demanded she was ours, and I struggled to even be around her. She isn't my mate, but how I feel about her is stronger than a mating bond. I know it.

Apollon places his hand on my shoulder. "The curse will end, and the fire will burn. Fire be with you, my dear friend."

"And with you," I reply. Hearing the curse even spoken out loud is a strange event in this city, but I know what Apollon is trying to do. He wants me to think further, away from Serei and to the hope her mating could bring to our people.

But I can't.

The idea of her mating with anyone cuts me deep down in my soul, lash after lash, until my heart bleeds.

I stand up off my seat. "I should be going."

"Nakoa, take my offer after tomorrow is over. Trust me and let me help you with this," he responds, turning to face me. I look at the gold symbol of a dragon on his chest. The king's symbol.

"Maybe I will," I say, and he smiles, looking pleased. I walk away straight out of the door and into the empty streets, taking a deep breath. My leathers around my neck feel tighter than before, and I tug at them before spreading my wings out and flying high above the towers. I fly straight down to my quarters by the castle, through the blue fabric door on the outside into the entrance hall. I kick off my shoes before opening my wooden door to my quarters, the only place I've called home.

My room is smaller than most, with a double bed, a small kitchenette area and a table where I work on weapons. A crate holds all my leathers at the end of my bed, and I tug off the leathers I'm wearing and pull on a softer shirt created by humans. I like human creations. The few treasures I have around my home show off this. I pick up a football and spin it on my finger, a trick a human boy taught me when I stayed in the Fenrir Court years ago. I kick the ball into the corner of my room and look over at my table where my weapons are covered. After I create a few flame lights to hover around the room, I sit on the chair and prop my elbows on the table, running my hands through my hair a few times.

She is taking her mate tomorrow.

I have to stop loving her.

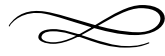
I pull back a white sheet covering, revealing a beautiful gold and silver sword in the middle of the table. It's delicate, made for a female to wield, and I've been making it for many, many years. Serei will need her own weapon when she is queen, and I'm sure the king could give her any number of

weapons she wanted. I hope she will like this one. If I'm going to leave, which I most likely will need to, I'm going to make sure she's safe before I do.

Loving her is going to destroy everything about me, and the truth is she'll never love me back.

I'm her guard, and I am not enough for a queen.

Nineteen



I WAIT IN THE DARKNESS, counting the seconds like the drops of water dripping down the stone wall outside my window. Only the sound of my own breathing keeps me company in my room, in my prison. A part of me wonders if I'm being selfish in all of this. My life isn't so bad, I'm looked after and safe...but I've never felt like I had a choice. My life was selected for me, by fate or by him, I don't know. But I am certain I want my own choice. My own fate.

Releasing a long breath, I hear the ancient grandfather clock mark midnight, its deep chimes echoing around the castle. I wait another ten minutes, listening for any sounds that aren't the normal ones like the guards outside or the mice running around the basement, before I move. I climb out of bed and go to my other side of the room, slowly and carefully keeping my footsteps light. I feel my wolf in my mind, pushing me to shift into her and run off the nervous energy, but I manage to ignore her the best I can. Quietly, I push my wooden cabinet aside to reveal a small cubby hole decorated with white symbols that look like they were carved with chalk. I tried washing them off, but they just reappeared. I don't know what this tunnel was used for, but I found it when I was nine. It's also when I found my dark shadow in the fire, when he first called to me and became my friend. He told me about this tunnel, and he gave me hope when no one else did. I pull open the wooden latch before crawling through the tight space.

"This was much easier when I was nine," I quietly mutter to myself, pushing away cobwebs and dust. The tunnel leads

me down to the bottom floor before I come out inside a kitchen cupboard, behind a box of pasta. I move the pasta and crawl out of the cabinet, closing the door behind me.

The flames in the fire flicker and burn brighter as he appears, and I smile.

He speaks to me with his deep, enchanting voice before I even have a chance to call him. "You are scared, my wolf."

"Yes," I answer. He is my friend, and I tell him everything; I always have, and he has always known me. I told him about my mating ceremony when I was ten, and he promised to save me. I loved him for that moment, for being the only one in my life to offer me something different.

"Trust me, my wolf. It all begins and ends tomorrow, and you will be safe with me. You will rule this city, as it always shall be, and he will be gone. I promise this," he replies as I walk over to the flames. The room is always so much warmer when he is in it, pushing away the cold. When I was eleven, he asked me if I wanted to be queen. Not the dragon king's queen, but rule on my own. At that point, I had seen the deep sadness in Nako's eyes and in so many of the males. They can never find their mates if they are stuck in here forever, following their king's rule. He is punishing them, and I want to free them. I told my shadow that I wanted to be queen, and he promised it was my future. If I were queen, I could change so many things. I could breathe life into this city and make the fire grow.

"I wish you'd tell me some of what you have planned for us tomorrow," I inquire. I move the chair so that I'm looking directly into the flames. The flames look normal, dark and splintering, burning orange and bright yellows, the occasional flicker of pinks. But right in the centre are dark eyes. They look like shadows, almost, that's why I gave him the nickname my shadow. He told me he doesn't have a name, not one spoken for many thousands of years. Shadow will do until we meet. Sometimes, when I look at his dark eyes, a shape of a face appears. A male with breathtakingly handsome features, but then it's gone.

“My wolf, at the ceremony before it begins, a portal will be opened for you. I will deal with everything else. You only need to walk through the portal, and I will find you,” he whispers to me. Dark promises in the flames.

“A portal to where?” I question.

“Somewhere temporary. We will need an army to destroy the dragon king, and I will find us one there,” he breathes out.

Army? We never discussed this.

I slowly nod and clear my throat. “Okay. If that’s what it takes...but we won’t kill any of the dragons, right? They brought me up, and they are my family, my pack. I want to rule this city and make it better for them, not kill them.”

My stomach drops. “War comes at a cost, my wolf, for those loyal to the dragon king. But, if you wish it, we will kill none. There are other ways.”

Relief flows through me. “Okay. Will you be on the other side?”

“No, but I will find you once I—” He pauses. “I will come for you, Serendipity.”

“I can’t wait to really meet you,” I say.

“Neither can I,” he replies, his tone affectionate. “There’s no one in the world that I can’t find once you leave the city.”

“Tomorrow,” I whisper.

I always wonder whether he can fully see me through the flames from wherever he is, if he can feel what I feel for him. I’ve had a crush on the male in the fire, my shadow, since I was thirteen. He is what I can choose. He is my freedom and future. I don’t want whatever else fate has lined up for me if it means a dragon king I’ve never met nor wanted.

“You will be free soon. You can go to see your mum and have a life you choose,” he whispers back. “Meet your half-brother and uncle. Your family.”

“I missed speaking to you this week. I came every night to the fire, but you didn’t come,” I say, rubbing my hands

together. "I thought you might have abandoned me."

"Never," he smoothly replies. "I am here. How did your training with Nakoa proceed?"

I love when he takes an interest in my life, when it's not us talking about ruling and running away. "I did lose a fight with Nakoa, but I was distracted today. I couldn't focus and he knew it. He cut our training short, ignored my concerns about the ceremony, and walked me home. My morning was the same as usual, I know that was your next question. Lessons in English, history and science. Lessons in magic, even when I don't have any, and lunch in the cafe where I tried peanut butter for the first time in a sandwich."

"A human food, no?"

"Yes," I reply with a smile. "Have you tried it?"

"No," he says. "But there was someone...with me who did, and I saw."

"You saw?"

He goes quiet, the flames flickering. "We all have powers, my wolf. When you get your true powers, you will equal only me."

I sigh. Not this discussion again. "I'm a wolf. I don't get powers."

"I've told you more than once, Serendipity of the house of Mnemosyne, that you are not just a wolf. Yes, your parents are both born wolves. That is true. But your mother was a goddess of spring and hell. Your bloodline is blessed by the Wolven gods. You will never just be a wolf. You are a queen. A queen who deserves to rule all the world and watch them bow."

I don't plan to rule all the worlds, but he does. He talks about it regularly. Sometimes I think it's just a turn of phrase that he uses, because I only want this city to rule. Nothing else.

"I feel like you've been my secret for so long. Tell me what you look like," I all but beg.

His laugh sends the hair on the back of my neck rising. "I am tall."

“Tell me more,” I tease.

“Soon,” he whispers back. “Sleep well, my wolf. Tomorrow is the day we have planned in secret. Everything changes then. Our prisons end.”

“Our pris—”

“Before I leave, I need to make a connection between us,” he interrupts.

“Why?” I ask, still a little dazed from his interruption and the change in his tone. He sounds...urgent.

His voice echoes around me. “Where I’m coming from is difficult to leave due to the magic laced into the walls of my home. I do not leave often, but I will come to save you, my wolf. To set me free and to give you a promise of a portal sent out, we can make a deal woven into the flames. A promise between our fires within our souls. Put your wrist into the flames, and I promise you, the deal will be made.”

I know I shouldn’t. Deals are something I was taught about as a child here. Magical deals, something woven in words that are marked on the soul and skin, should not be taken lightly, even in wolves. Dragons use deals to get their own way, to always win. The deal always falls in their favour, and it’s a regular joke between the males here to make deals, get new tattooed markings, and see who wins. Marks mean power in this world, and they are forever. There isn’t a mark on my skin anywhere, but I’ve seen the ones on Reine and my mama. I’ve seen the markings down Nakoa’s back that he told me every single dragon has and I will receive tomorrow, binding me to this pack forever.

I don’t want that.

This is my choice.

“I trust you,” I tell him, because I do. He’s been there, he’s always been there for me and listened to me, not told me who I should be and what I should be. After pushing up my sleeve, I put my arm into the fire without looking back. Fires have never hurt me. I don’t burn, and I like touching the flames. But this, it feels different. A cold feeling laces up my arm, stinging

like ice burning into my skin. I try to move, but the flames feel like ropes, getting tighter the more I struggle.

“It hurts,” I whisper, struggling to pull my arm out. I slam my other hand over my mouth to stop the scream leaving my lips as the pain intensifies. Suddenly, the flames settle, and I pull my arm out, gasping for air. I look down at my wrist, and in the middle of it is a marking made of black swirling ink that settles into my skin. It’s like a dragon, but not what I’ve seen before. It’s longer, fiercer, has sharper teeth lining its mouth and swirls colouring its body. It almost seems to move on its own.

“It’s a Wolven,” he tells me. “We will see each other tomorrow, my wolf.”

“Wait,” I say, but he’s gone. The flames flicker back to normal. I hear footsteps in the distance, and I run across the kitchen, pulling my sleeve down, and open the cupboard door right before Aunt Reine walks in. I put on my best innocent expression as I turn to her, and she frowns, shutting the door behind her.

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping?”

“Shouldn’t you?” I counter.

She smiles at me. “You’re so much like your mother, always countering a question with another question. Always thinking ahead. Too intelligent for your own good. Beautiful and yet so very unsure of herself.”

“My mum was unsure of herself?” I ask. The idea is almost laughable to me. My mama, the queen of the wolves and a literal goddess reborn, was unsure of herself. I know my mother—at least I think I do—and I can’t imagine her ever faltering.

“I know your mother had been through hell and back by the time she was your age, and it made her question so much of her life,” she tells me, looking over at the flames. “Tomorrow, she will be there and tell you everything. It’s time...but I need you to promise me something.”

“Mum is going to be at the mating ceremony?” I quietly say.

“Yes, it was agreed upon years ago. After tomorrow, you will be able to see her whenever you wish. Your brother and my sons too,” she softly explains. My eyes fill with tears because it’s something I want, something I’ve wished for...but it comes at a price I won’t pay. I won’t be mated to a stranger.

A monster, for all I know.

“Promise what, Reine?”

She looks at me, her eyes dead set on mine. “When you find out the truth, don’t let it change you. You are kind, brilliant, and will be a queen this world fears as much as it loves. Your blood, your past, cannot change your future. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Aunt Reine,” I reply, wondering what the hell she is going on about. What could I find out that would make me rethink everything? I suppose it doesn’t matter, because after tomorrow, everything is going to change, anyway.

“Can you tell me some of my past now?”

She sighs and nods once. “Let me make us hot chocolates first.”

I watch her as she breezes around the kitchen, boiling water on the stove and pouring in the chocolate powder before adding cream and a dash of chocolate sprinkles on top. Aunt Reine hands me mine, and I snuggle into the chair as she sits down.

“As you know, I was an aunt to your mother when she was growing up. I was best friends with her dear mother. Your grandmother.”

“What was she like?” I know she passed away, but no one told me how.

“She was my best friend for a reason. When I met her, she was kicking the ass of two seven-year-olds who started to try to bully her. We were both only six at the time, and since that moment, I knew she would have my back and I hers,” she

fondly says. “Your grandmother was born with fire in her veins, as was your mother and as were you.”

“How did she die then?”

Aunt Reine’s eyes radiate sadness. “Our pack was attacked by angels in the wars, well before you were born. It was a bad time, and no one escaped unscathed from that. We were pretty much slaughtered, and I escaped with the few that I could and my sons with me. But there weren’t many of us, and we lost a lot that day. A hell of a lot, including your grandmother and your mother.”

“My mama disappeared?”

“Yes, she just disappeared. No one knew where she’d gone. What we didn’t know at the time, and we knew later on, is that your grandmother had an angel friend, someone she grew up with. It’s complicated, but he took your mum away and put her in a pack where the angels could never find her. The Ravensword Pack.”

“I’ve heard that name before. That’s Jesper’s last name,” I say, remembering his letters to me that are in my room. I thought it was odd he is the only one who didn’t take the last name of Fall, when he is part of my mama’s pack.

“Yes, it was your mother’s last name for a while. Her memories were all taken from her, and she did not know anything. That’s all I wanted to tell you for now. Only that she found her way to my sons, and they’d loved each other since they were children,” she softly tells me. “Fated mates always find each other.”

I try to ignore the dig at fated mates and the very thing I am trying to escape.

I take a deep drink for courage. “Who is my father?”

I see her eyes darken for a second. “All I can tell you is that he is dead, and you must ask your mother for more information on that.”

“Okay, but what or who killed him? Did he know about me? Did I ever meet him?” I question.

Aunt Reine looks away. “You should ask your mother.”

“I can’t because I only see her once a year!” I say. “She never talks about the past, about her story or how I even ended up here and not with her!”

“That’s because she can’t!” Aunt Reine snaps. Her eyes slowly widen as I freeze. “I...I can’t tell you why, but she can’t tell you. Neither can I.”

I furrow my brow. “Does the dragon king have something to do with this?”

She doesn’t say anything, and that is an answer enough. Aunt Reine gets up and places her hot chocolate on the side. “You should get some sleep.”

“None of you are doing anything to stop this, are you?” I quietly ask. “I hoped—no, prayed—that one of my family would stop this. That they would give me a choice, but you won’t. None of you will.”

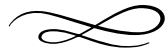
“Serei—”

“No. I’m tired of wishing that one of you would set me free from this life. You can call me a spoiled brat, and in some ways, I probably am, because you’re right, I’m safe here, but being safe isn’t worth a life tied to a male who forces my family not to tell me the truth. He is a monster.”

“He isn’t a monster, even if he pretends to be,” she softly says. “I’ve known real monsters, Serei, and I pray every day to the old gods that you never do.”

I leave my hot chocolate on the side and walk out, ignoring Aunt Reine calling for me as I go. They won’t save me from this, but he will.

Twenty



THE THICK COTTON-WHITE dress hangs off me into a puddle on the floor, but the lace back makes me feel like I can't breathe.

I feel like a caged wolf, and there is no escaping this. My chest feels tight, and the familiar sense of panic takes over, numbing everything out around me until I can only focus on my breathing. Panic attacks are not a rare thing for me, but usually Nakoa or Reine can calm me down, talk me out of whatever it is that has freaked me out, but this time, I don't think that is going to happen.

Reine finishes doing my long hair into a complicated mixture of braids tied together, with my gold strands shining in the light, and I try to focus on her. My aunt who loves me, who wouldn't put me in danger. My chest only feels tighter.

"I'll give you some time alone," Aunt Reine says, kissing the top of my head and leaving me in the chair, facing the mirror and struggling to control every breath out of my mouth. Struggling to make myself calm down.

Focus, Serei.

This isn't my fate.

I blow out a long breath and remember what I need to do. I head over to my bed and pull up my skirts to strap on one of the daggers that Valentine, one of my mother's mates, had made for me. I leave the second one in my nightstand, with a note on top to say it's for Nakoa. My final gift to him. I pull the leather straps tight around my thigh, admiring the gold and

red blade. It glows when there is danger, and it might give me some protection wherever I'm going. Five throwing blades go into my boots, hidden under my dress, and I only wish I could find somewhere to hide my sword...

I look at myself one more time in the mirror, barely recognising myself anymore. Who am I if I'm not his queen? Who am I when I am free?

Today, I find out.

I glance at my arm, the Wolven marking hidden by thick cotton-white gloves that go up to my elbow. My freedom. I know I couldn't walk out of this room without knowing he will be there and he will help me.

He will save me.

My shadow in the flames.

The door is knocked twice, and Nakoa walks in after I call. "You look really...nice."

I glower at him, and he tries to hide his smirk, but in all his immortal years, he hasn't learnt that any woman can see right through him. "Ready, Serei?"

"Never," I reply, eyeing his ceremony outfit. Leather, similar to their fighting clothes, but this is red and black, all the way up to his neck. Two swords hang off his back, the gold blades reflecting the light coming through the window. I will be sad to leave this city, even for a short time. They are my family, but family shouldn't force you into a situation you can't escape.

"I can hear your heart beating a million times a minute," Nakoa claims, leaning against the door. "Today should be a celebration."

"For you," I snap.

He tenses and straightens, his eyes flashing with a flicker of hurt. "He is ready for you. We should leave."

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I didn't mean to snap at you...I just—"

“I know you’re scared, Serei, but I hate that you don’t trust me enough to know I’d never do anything to hurt you. That I’d never let him anywhere near you if I thought for a second he would hurt you,” he says, coming closer. “Trust me, Serei?”

I turn away and try to pretend I can’t sense how much I’ve upset him already. When I leave later on, he is going to be much more upset.

“Come, Serei.”

I turn and link my arm through his waiting arm, letting him walk me out of my childhood room. I glance at it one more time and sadly wonder how long it will be before I get to come home. Was this ever my home if it’s a prison?

I swallow down my sadness and nerves before holding my head high.

I’m Serendipity Fall, and I have fire in my veins, just like my mother and my grandmother, and I will choose my fate.

The short walk feels longer, the echo of every step on the stone filling my ears, along with my racing heart. Nakoia was right about that, if nothing else.

Aunt Reine is waiting outside the door in a satin red dress with twirling leather straps on her shoulders and a sweeping blood-red cloak hanging off her back.

Aunt Reine looks like a queen.

I can’t see how she can look at me and see the same thing.

Behind her waits a row of dragon shifters in two lines, one on either side of a red fabric pathway leading to the ceremony. The rows of them, all in red and black leather, make me feel like there is no escape.

None at all.

“Breathe,” Nakoia whispers to me as Aunt Reine comes to my other side, and they both step back to walk behind me.

I’m on my own.

I gulp and start walking down the pathway, looking up at the beams of light coming through the gaps in the mountain

and to the bright sun outside. Soon I will see it. Soon I will see the sun and the stars, and pray to the gods as a free wolf.

My wolf howls in my chest, agreeing with me.

I feel like there isn't enough air in my lungs as I carry on walking, feeling the eyes of every shifter I pass. Their judgment.

The pathway leads up the castle, through gates that have always been locked with magic and through courtyards filled with old moss-covered statues and towering pillars with sharp diamond-shaped crystals on the tips of them. We come to massive steel doors shaped like dragon teeth with fire blowing out from behind the teeth. I watch the doors slowly open, my heart racing faster with every second before there is silence and we continue walking. My feet stop as I suddenly can't breathe.

He is in there.

Right behind another pair of gates is the main entrance to the castle, and I can sense him.

I can sense my mother too and so many other wolves and dragons.

"Serei, are you okay?" Aunt Reine asks.

Everything slows down as I look up at the door and see the dark shadow of a man appearing, gold light radiating off the edges of him.

The dragon king.

I watch as he steps into the light, and he takes my breath away.

If males could be described as beautiful, it isn't enough of a word for him.

He takes the air from my lungs, crushing my soul and heart in the process. His blond hair is short, with golden tresses falling onto his forehead. He has sharp features, high cheekbones, wide lips and bright gold eyes that remind me of the bright light in the world. His skin is tanned, like he has spent the last twenty years sunbathing, and black markings

curl up his neck from under his leather. He has muscular shoulders, corded muscular arms, and gods above, he looks built to be the most handsome male in this world. Gold wings stretch out of his back, resting on either side of him, and they are the biggest wings I've seen a dragon shifter have before.

Why couldn't he be ugly?

The dragon king pauses on the top step, sliding his hands into his pockets and watching me with a cold, guarded expression.

One I mimic.

He tilts his head to the side, like a predator wondering why his prey isn't running from him, and every instinct in me wants me to run.

Run as fast as I can from this male.

"Serei...", Aunt Reine whispers, and only then do I notice I'm the only one standing. Every shifter, including Aunt Reine and Nakoa are on their knees, head bent. "Bow."

I make sure I'm looking right at the dragon king as I reply. "No."

He smirks, a smile that is breathtaking in itself.

Just then, I feel it.

My soul burns and I willingly let it. Flames spreading out from under my feet, swirling around like a tornado, and the mark on my wrist lights up under the glove, burning a deep blue like the flames around me.

"SEREI, STOP!" I hear Nakoa shout, but the fire explodes before I can stop it. Roars and shouts fill my ears as my legs go weak, and I start to fall backwards, into the flames behind me, and the world goes black for a few moments before I'm falling in the air.

I smack onto a hard, cold floor and gasp from the impact. I groan, slowing down my racing heart as I breathe in ice cold air, and my skin prickles.

It's cold.

I'm outside the city.

A smile tilts my lips up until I remember the flames spreading out of me and hitting everyone I love. They shouldn't be hurt, right?

I hope not. I never wanted to hurt them. The guilt feels like a weight on my chest as I stand up, brushing off dirt from my hands onto my dress. I pull off my gloves and slam them onto the dirty floor before having a real look at where I am. It's a rotting building, stinking of damp, and there is little silver light pouring in from outside. I stumble around in the dark, ignoring the sound of rats scurrying nearby, and find a door, which is padlocked. I grab the lock and pull hard, using my shifter strength. It snaps and I pull the door open. Flickering yellow light beams into my eyes from a light on a tall metal stick nearby. It flickers on and off occasionally, and it gives me a chance to look up at the many tall city buildings around me, the stretch of broken road that I'm stood on, and the shell of a car nearby that looks like it was caught in a fire.

"Where the fires am I?" I mutter just as I look up and freeze.

The night sky shines bright, a million or more stars decorating the sky, with the moon looming in the middle of them all.

The stars I've prayed to see for so many years.

My smile is bigger than the moon as I spin around in a circle, joy filling my heart. I'm free. It's the stars and me until my shadow finds me.

But for now, I need to find somewhere safe. I'm not sure where this is, but judging from the night sky, it's far away from the city and the pack.

Picking up the ends of my dress, I start walking down the road, looking up at the gigantic buildings and trying to pick up what the unusual scent is. It's not shifter...but what is it?

It has to be a human scent, if I was going to guess, but I'm not sure. I've scented humans on things Nakoa has brought me in the past, but it has always been faint. Humans aren't that

much of a danger, anyway. My wolf could destroy them in seconds, but I'd rather not shift and lose my weapons and clothes unless I have to.

I come to the end of the street and have a quick glance down at the bigger road. This one is filled with cars that all look old and destroyed. Rubbish of all kinds is littered across the street, and it's silent other than the odd animals I hear running about. Going still, my wolf's hearing picks up on a voice, and I turn to look behind me, pausing when I see a male.

Black hair hidden under a grey hat, dull blue eyes, pale skin, a nasty scar across his neck, and his features are anything but handsome. Definitely human.

My senses tell me as much, even though I've never met one before, and he really, really smells like shit.

"The boss will never believe we found a shifter bitch just wandering about," he remarks in a strange accent, and two more humans step out of the shadows, both holding some kind of weapon. It's black and long and smells like fire.

I take a step back, and the human in the middle only smiles. "Run if you want. It's more fun that way."

"I don't run from a fight," I growl low, pulling out my dagger. I've never seen it glow before, and now the red glow radiates between us.

The human nods at one of his friends, and there is a loud, sharp noise right before something slams into my lower leg. I cry out in pain, shocked, as I look down to see blood pouring from a small wound in my leg.

Fuck.

Without thinking about it, I try to run away, but I only manage to limp a few steps before there is a bright, white light in my eyes as a car slams right into my chest, and the world flickers into darkness.

Twenty-One



THE SCORCHING FLAMES BUILD HIGHER

around her until she is hidden within them, and for the second time in my immortal life, I can't stop this. Sending out my own flames, I get seconds to protect my people before the flames explode. My shield holds, even if the power hits me harder than I expected, and when the flames vanish, Serendipity is gone.

“Fuck!” I roar, my wings spreading out around me. Running to the spot where she stood, I touch the boiling hot ground and pick up the black ash I find, running it through my fingers. “Bastard.”

“Serei? SEREI!” Reine shouts behind me, searching for her ward.

My mate isn't here. She isn't in this city anymore.

“I gave you one fucking job!” I growl, straightening up, eyeing the wolf. “To watch her until I returned.”

“I did watch her! I love her like my own!” Reine growls right back at me. She seems to realise who she is shouting at a second too slowly, and she bows her head, along with my dragons. “I don't know how she could have done this.”

“She didn't do this alone,” I snap, looking for the guard I assigned to her. Nakoa rises as I stop in front of him. “Tell me she can protect herself. That you taught her as well as I taught you.”

Panic and fear are old friends of mine, emotions I haven't felt in a long time. Now they are back, and until I see my mate safe, I doubt I will stop feeling them.

If she had my flames, my power, she would be safe. I would give her all my strength and power to keep her alive, and that's what the ceremony was about. A blood binding so she can access my power and be a powerful queen that all would fear. No one would ever touch her, and I could go back to being the silent protector.

She never had to choose me.

I didn't expect her to.

I'm a monster, but I will protect her. I will protect my people.

I tighten my hands into fists as Nakoa answers me. "She can fight, and she is fast. Faster than most shifters. As for the flames, I see flickers in her eyes at times of anger but never more."

"Then she is in danger," I retort.

I spread out my wings, and I fly straight into the air, diving through the warm air to her quarters. I hear Serendipity's mother and her mates flooding out into the courtyard, shouting and asking where she is, but they can wait. Everything can wait until I find out where she is.

I won't lose her before I've even truly met her.

The castle doors are open when I land outside, the ground shaking from my power. I head to her bedroom, hoping to find some clue to where she's gone. Her sweet scent overwhelms me, turning me on and making my leathers tight. She smells like lily blossoms and midnight fires. Fuck. I adjust myself and look around for any clues, praying to the fire that I don't find what I suspect I will.

What I suspect I saw in the flames.

There's only one person I know who can call blue flames like that, and I won't believe it. I go completely and utterly

still, and I'm shocked for the first time in a thousand fucking years by a painting.

In the corner of the room lies a painting, simple but elegantly done. Dark blue flames with black eyes in the middle. Eyes I know well. I spent years hunting him, and he spent years destroying everything good in my life until there was little left. Together, we destroyed everything around us before I locked him in that prison. A rage builds in my chest, and my fire explodes out of me, burning everything in the room, leaving it on fire as I walk out. I head straight into the courtyard where my five closest guards are waiting. Nakoa stands with them, and despite my urge to hang him off my chandelier for missing the clues that something was wrong with Serendipity, I decide to let him come.

She trusts him, from what I've seen.

"Is it him?" Apollon questions, and I nod. Each of my guards straightens, knowing what it means. What we will be walking into. My guards have been alive nearly as long as I have, and they remember the destruction caused so many years past.

The Queen of the Wolves and her four mates come running into the courtyard. "Where is my daughter?"

I eye Queen Mairin and her mates. "Gone. Isn't that clear?"

"Where?" she demands.

"You might be queen in your pack, but here, I rule," I growl at her. Her mates growl right back, moving to her side. "As you're her mother, I will allow that behaviour. Don't test me a second time."

"Where is my daughter?" she repeats, green flames flickering from her fingers.

"You need to go and check your city, the prisons. You're going to find that someone's missing," I say coldly. "Someone very dangerous. I put him in there a very fucking long time ago, and the wolves were meant to protect the prison."

She blanches, and Alpha Valentine steps forward. “Careful of your judgment of us, dragon. There’s no one missing. We would have heard of it.”

“He’s definitely missing, because he took her!” I roar. “And now we are all in danger. Especially her.”

“Then we find her,” Silas suggests. “We send out every shifter to every inch of the world to find her.”

“No, I’m going to find her. I can track her because she is mine.”

No one argues with that comment until Queen Mairin speaks. “Maybe she ran away with him because you locked her in here! You told her nothing, disappeared—as we recently found out—and let me only see her once a year and still tell her nothing. Maybe you are the reason she trusted a stranger!”

Anger builds in my chest, and she holds my stare. “Arawn has taken her. She would not go willingly.”

“We will search with you,” Ragnar says, interrupting. “All that matters is making sure Dip is safe.”

“This is work for dragons, and you will slow us down,” I reply. “And if Arawn finds you first, you will die. All of you will.”

“What is he?” Queen Mairin demands.

“A fallen god,” I state. “My brother, in a sense.”

“Find her,” Queen Mairin demands. “And we will make sure the prison is secure for when you lock Arawn back in there.”

“This time, I’m going to kill him,” I reply and shoot up into the skies, letting my guards and Nakoa follow me. I shoot out one of the holes in the top of the mountain and into the burning sunlight. I let it shine on me for a second before I search for her.

She is a part of me, and I will always find her.

I will bring her home and crown her my queen.

Twenty-Two



“WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU, SERENDIPITY?”

I spin around at the dark voice, echoing around the stone-walled bedroom. There, sitting on an imposing bed made for a king, Draycian has his head bowed.

“You’re not real,” I say, taking a step back. The stone walls start to crack, and I flinch.

Draycian lifts his head, surprise lighting up his eyes as he looks right at me, and he smirks. The smile is nothing short of wicked. “Ah, we can dream walk, I see.”

He stands up and I take another step back, and the wall cracks further as I plaster my back to it. Draycian leaves no space between us as he dominates the room with his essence. He scents like the brightest sunshine, dark forests, and burning flames right before they dim out. “Tell me where you are.”

“Fuck no,” I growl.

His hand snaps out and softly grabs my chin, arching my face up to his. I have no choice but to look into his eyes. “You’re in danger, little wolf.”

“From you. Yes, I’ve always been,” I remark.

His laugh is seductive, and I clench my thighs together, hating how my body reacts to him. He takes a deep breath, his eyes flashing gold. “I was never your enemy. I was never your monster.”

“You took me away from my family!” I shout, but I don’t move. I try not to notice the large bulge pushing into my stomach and every other inch of him I can feel.

“Listen to me, Serendipity—”

“No,” I bite out. “I don’t care that you claim we are mates. I want to be free, and I want someone else. You’re just going to have to get used to that.”

He leans down, the sound of the cracks in the wall deafening, but I still hear him as clear as the night sky in summer. “Stop fooling yourself. You’ve been mine from the start, and I’ve been yours. When I save your beautifully stubborn ass, I expect you to thank me.”

Bastard. Bastard. Bastard.

The cracks in the walls suddenly give, and the room explodes around us, but we don’t move, and I glare at him until there is nothing but darkness.

“I’m not a fucking doctor, Sophie! I don’t know what to do,” a foggy female voice floats around the room, and warm hands press down on my shoulders. “We can wrap it up to stop the bleeding, but—”

“That’ll just make more of a mess,” another voice interrupts. “The bullet has to come out before we stitch it. I’ll deal with this.”

The arguing voices fade in and out before there’s more pain and a deep pulling feeling on my leg that makes me want to scream if I had the strength to even open my eyes. The darkness pulls me back under, and for a while, there is nothing but a feeling of warmth surrounding me. The next time I become aware of the female voices, there is a new voice. “She has a fever.”

“Of course she does. They poison the bullets to slow shifters down,” another says. “Don’t you remember, or have you been here that long?”

“Don’t be a bitch. How can we help her?”

“We don’t. She lives or she doesn’t,” the voice replies before everything fades once again, and the last thing I feel is someone softly stroking my arm.

I’m not sure how much time passes before I wake up again, and this time, I open my eyes and try not to panic as I search for my wolf and find nothing. Just an emptiness where she used to be. I place a hand on my chest, pushing down a cry, and touch the soft yellow blanket thrown over me. My lips are dry and cracked as I part them and turn on the bed, flinching in pain.

I feel weak, like everything is in a haze, and I can’t focus for a few minutes. My head spins as I force my shaky hands onto the mattress and push myself up. I look over to see the outline of a girl lying on a bed opposite me, curled up into a ball and snoring. Loudly. She’s fast asleep, but who in the fires is she?

The room is pretty dim except for a plain lamp on a worn wooden cabinet between our beds, and it smells like humans and shifters in here. Wolf shifters, not dragon. I try to move my legs out of the bed and flinch in pain from my leg, a small cry leaving my lips. I pull off the quilt and have a look at my leg after pulling up the white dress I’m in. Not my mating ceremony dress, but something new. I hate that someone has undressed me, and sickness crawls up my throat at the thought. I push it aside to focus on my leg, where that weapon struck me. Bullet. I remember someone talking about a bullet in my leg. It’s been taken out of my leg by the looks of it, and it’s been stitched up. It will heal in a week or so. Hopefully. I’ve never really been injured before or had a chance to heal. The worst thing I ever did was cut my arm with a sword, and even then, it was a small cut.

“It still looks red, and saw you had a bit of an infection from the poison-coated bullets,” a soft, melodic voice says. I look up to see the girl from the other bed standing next to me. I never even heard her move out of the bed, let alone come this close. She has curly red hair that falls to her knees, with two thin braids hanging on either side of her face. Her eyes are silver, and she is very pretty in a supernatural way most are. I

don't recognise the marking on her chest, but it looks like four circles with a wolf in the middle.

A white gown hangs off her shoulders, and I notice it's the same kind of white gown I'm wearing. I also notice she looks about the same age as me, and she's definitely a wolf shifter. "Can I sit?"

I nod once, not feeling any bad vibes from her. She sits down on the edge of the bed, careful not to touch me, and I move my legs as far away as possible.

"Who are you?" I demand.

Her brow furrows. "You have such a strange accent. Who are you?"

"I asked first," I say. She has the same accent as the males who shot me and ran me over.

She crosses her arms. "My name is Nimue Windshire, but my friends call me Nimmy. You can too."

"My name is Serendipity Fall. Serei for short," I decide to say. I need to find out where I am and how to get out, and this wolf might be able to help me.

We look at each other for a moment, and she finally speaks. "It was touch and go for a bit there, even for us wolves and our healing. I have to say I was quite surprised to see you turn up here. Shifters are rare these days, and I've been the only full-blooded wolf for three years."

"Shifters are rare?" I ask, confused. I cough a few times, the left side of my body hurting like my ribs are broken or at least bruised. "Where is here?"

Nimmy walks across the room past two beds, with two other females sleeping in them, and pours me a glass of water from a sink in the corner of the room and brings it back. She hands me the drink, and my hand shakes as I take it. "Drink slowly."

I nod and pace myself as I drink the water, enjoying it like I haven't had a sip for days. "How long have I been asleep?"

“So your question has a complicated answer. I don’t know exactly where we are, but it’s outside of old New York. I’ve been here for years, and we don’t go outside often, and when we do, it’s been night, so I haven’t seen much else but trees and fields,” she explains. “As for why we are here, we all have been captured by a human gang called Rox. They own pretty much all of what’s left of New York and deal with slaves. They used to trade with the angel king years ago, but when he died, all trade was stopped and they looked inwards.”

“Humans? Why don’t you shift and rip them to pieces?” I inquire.

“They drug our food and inject us if we just pretend to eat,” she softly explains, and I see the flicker of pain in her eyes. “It’s not a great life, and I gave up hope a long time ago that I will ever get out of here.”

My heart shatters for her, for the pain and hopelessness I hear in her voice. I can’t stop myself as I take her hand and hold it tightly. “I am going to get us out of here.”

She laughs lightly and takes her hand from mine. “No, you can’t. Thanks though, Serei. All you need to know is that humans are cruel. All males are cruel, for that matter, and I’m so, so sorry you are here.”

I ignore the fear lacing around my heart and refuse to become as hopeless as she has become. I am going to get us out of here and destroy this place when I’m done. Somehow. I just need a plan. I change the subject for a second and nod at the other two beds. “Who are they?”

“Sophie, a half wolf shifter and Devika, a human. They both have been here about two years,” she tells me. “They’re given drugs earlier because it was their night out there with the males. It’s our night tomorrow, and now that you’re awake, there’s no way they’ll let you off. I’m sorry.”

“What do they do with us, then?” I say.

“We are their amusement, in any way that our boss wants. Sometimes it’s simply dancing and drinking with them as they touch us like dolls. Those are the good nights. Other times it’s

private,” she whispers at the end, and I gulp at what she means. A sense of horror fills me as I realise what she’s saying, and it’s soon replaced with pure anger.

“I’m so sorry,” I tell her. “I can’t even imagine.”

“You won’t have to soon, and I am the one who is sorry,” she replies, wiping tears from her eyes. “So, whereabouts were you hiding for so long? I didn’t know many wolf shifters were left on these lands. Most of them emigrated over, found a boat or something, and escaped. My aunt and cousin did that, and they went to a big pack over there. I always hoped to find them.”

“Fall Mountain Pack?” I question.

She shrugs. “I don’t know. But anyway, where are you from?”

Telling her the truth would be a long explanation, and I carefully skirt the answer. “Where are you from?”

Nimmy’s red eyebrows pull down, but she answers me. “I grew up here in New York with my aunt and cousin, but there was a street war between the gangs when I was fourteen. That’s how I missed the boat and lost my aunt and cousin. I couldn’t find another boat, and I was left on the streets like many kids were. I first shifted when I was seven, so I mostly stayed in wolf form and managed to hide for a year before I got caught by this bastard gang and brought here. That was four years ago.”

By the fires, her life sounds awful.

She looks at me, expectant and waiting. “I’m not from here, and it’s complicated. I shouldn’t be here.”

“None of us should. It’s okay, you can tell me more when you’re good and ready,” she softly says. I don’t know if I could be as kind as she is if my life was like hers. Still, being kind when your life is in darkness is a true miracle.

It feels weird to have a girl to talk to who isn’t my mother or aunt. Part of me likes it, but most of me is terrified of what situation I’ve gotten myself into. My entire body hurts, but I’m not too weak to get the hell out of this place. Hopefully, before

Draycian finds me. He sounded pissed in my dream and yet, it might not be real anyway. It could have just been a dream about his stupidly handsome face.

I hate that I'm even thinking about him.

By the fires, I need to focus on getting out of here. My shadow should come for me soon. He knows where I am, and he won't let these humans hurt me. I hate that I left one prison only to be thrown right back into another one. A worse one.

My life choices aren't looking great right at this moment.

I push my legs off the bed, and Nimmy stands up, shaking her head. She lowers her voice. "Don't do anything stupid. They will pour gas into the room, and it only makes you weaker. Trust me, Serei."

"I don't know you, and I can't just sit here, Nimmy," I tell her. I don't mean it in a harsh way, but there is no mistaking the flicker of pain in her eyes.

"Fine," she frustratedly sighs. "But they sell troublemakers to their clients, and trust me, I can't imagine that is a nice life. Or they kill them. That's the only way out of here, and honestly, I'd like to see you stay alive."

I look at her and the door, running her warnings over in my mind. I know I should sit down and rest, build my strength and take them by surprise, but the reckless side of me wants to bang the door down until they knock me out with gas.

"Alright," I say, sitting down and choosing to take a breather. "But you've been here a long time, you must have thought of a way to escape. A plan. Just something, Nimmy."

She moves closer, lowering her voice further. "There have been sixteen girls here I've met, and one of them was an angel, and she got out somehow at a garden party outside this mansion. I watched her fly through the clouds, and it was like she came alive. I can't even remember what it's like to run as a wolf anymore, but I imagine it was like that. She flew for a bit before they shot her down, and they dragged her back for the men to...well, make sure she died. It was horrible to watch. When they were done, I was allowed to sit with her, and she

told me there was a parking lot full of cars in the forest right before she died. My only plan is to get to the forest and get a car. One of them will work.”

If I didn’t feel sick before, I do now. The poor angel. Every bastard in this mansion needs to die, and they will do. I’m going to kill them. For Nimmy, for the other girls, and for myself. I assume “shot” is the word for what happened to my leg. That bullet hurt. I’ve never killed anyone before, but I think these monsters are a good place to start.

“Can you drive?”

She looks down. “No, you?”

I shrug. “I read a lot about driving but never actually tried. What about those two?”

“I’ll ask them. Sophie is friendly, but Devika is more difficult,” she softly states. “But she pulled the bullet out of your leg, stitched you up, and watched you for four nights in a row.”

“I owe you all my life,” I say.

She shrugs. “Don’t worry about it. Get some sleep, yeah?”

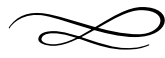
I nod, watching as she goes back to her bed and curls up into a ball, pulling the blanket over her small, way too thin frame.

Lying back down, I look up at the ceiling and try to ignore the sense of fear trickling into the back of my throat. I know that my shadow didn’t mean for this to happen to me. He would never put me in this position, in this much danger. He’s my friend. But where is he? I lift my arm into the air and look at the mark on my wrist. It’s not glowing anymore, nor is it moving, but it’s like a new part of me that I’m aware of. I feel weaker by the second, and I hate it. It must have been the poison and the car, and maybe Nimmy is right. Some rest will heal me.

I soon drift back into a sleep, my soul searching for someone. This time, instead of Draycian, I see dark eyes looking back at me, and I hear one single word.

“Mine.”

Twenty-Three



WARM HANDS SHAKE my shoulders with an urgency that has me jolting up, my heart racing. For some reason, I expected to see Draycian leaning over me, furious at me. But I soon realise that isn't real, and I'm still here, a slave to humans. At least for now. Nimmy is leaning over me, her eyes wide with fear. I blink from the bright light in the room, beaming from spotlights on the ceiling and showcasing the sorry state of the damp, aged room. The walls are peeling from the water dripping down them, and now that I'm not so sick, I can smell it.

"You need to wake up. They're coming earlier than usual," she quickly tells me, pulling off my quilt.

"How can you tell?" I groggily question, pointing at the closed door.

"You can always hear them. Their boots on the creaky wooden steps down the hall," she hurriedly tells me. Sure enough, when I focus, I can just about hear them, the echo of footsteps coming closer, and I know if my wolf senses weren't dulled, I'd hear them a mile off. "Can you stand on it yet?"

Oh right, the leg. Nimmy helps me stand, albeit a little shakily, but I nod to her. It's going to hurt to stand on it for a while, but I can deal with it. Nimmy waits to make sure I don't fall over before nodding at the space by the wall at the head of my bed.

"They will want you to wait there."

My eyes widen. "I—"

“Please just do it,” she asks of me. Every part of me wants to tell her no and fight her on it, but the look in her eyes stops me. She is desperate, and I swear...there is worry in her eyes. True worry.

“Why do you care so much?” I question. “You barely know me.”

“My wolf isn’t all gone, you know. I can sense what you are, and we haven’t seen your kind in a long time. It took me a while to realise what I was scenting, what my wolf was telling me. You can’t die in here,” she firmly states, looking so much stronger than I’ve seen her before. It surprises me. Maybe she has a little fire behind her eyes, too. “I will keep you alive, Serei.”

I take a step forward, my hair falling over my shoulders. “What are you talking about?”

She furrows her brow. “You’re an—”

The sound of locks clicking makes her pause, and she bolts across the room, her footsteps silent. Wow, I want to learn to move like that. Nako would be amazed. He is always telling me off for my heavy footsteps in training. I manage to limp over to the wall, copying Nimmy’s stance as she plasters her back to the damp wall. Glancing over, the other two girls in the room are already out of their beds, backs against the wall and neither looking my way. Three men walk in after pushing the door open, and I faintly hear the sound of music behind them. The men must be brothers or relatives of some kind, as they all look like each other, in similar plain and really strange clothing. They have beefy arms, big stomachs, and bald heads, with a mixture of markings on their arms and necks. But they aren’t magical markings. They look like a faded pen drew them on.

The one in the middle throws two sparkling wine-red dresses on the ground at his feet and points at them. “Get dressed. Now. The boss wants you to hurry.”

No one speaks or moves as they look at me. I hold the middle one’s eyes, and he bares his solid gold teeth at me in a sneer. “It’s going to be a fun night, boys.”

“Ten hundred dollars on the bitch being sold before the end of the night,” the one on the right laughs.

“Nah, we need new bitches. These are boring,” the middle one replies before they all walk out, and only then do I unclench my fists. Bastards.

I glance over at the other two females, Sophie and Devika. They’re both looking forward, completely quiet as the door shuts, and Devika turns her cobalt blue eyes on me. Nimmy is across the room in seconds, picking up the dresses and walking back to me, handing me one, but I don’t take it and push it back into her hands. “I’m not wearing that.”

“You have to, Serei. They will forcibly dress you otherwise,” she warns me and leaves the dress in my hands. She starts pulling off her own dress, and I flinch at the marks on her body. So many little cuts that haven’t healed right mark her legs, stomach and back. I swear some of them look like initials have been carved into her skin. Sickness rises in my throat, and I try to hide it from her as she turns back to me, pulling the dress on.

Needing to look away from Nimmy for a second to compose myself before I cry for her, I find Devika still watching me. Assessing me, I suspect. Devika might be human, but there is something very strange about her. She has long black hair that’s pulled up into a tight ponytail, and her eyes are nothing short of a force of nature. I’ve never met an absolutely stunning human that could pass for a supernatural, but she could. Easily. She is very thin like Nimmy, and there are several whoppers of bruises all down her arms. I don’t want to know what other bruises are under her white dress.

The other girl, Sophie, is as quiet as a mouse, and her head is bowed like the human males are still in the room. I can barely see her face under the mop of curly black hair, but I can sense a hint of wolf from her scent. It’s just buried, hidden, maybe what a half wolf must be like. I’ve never ever met one of those before, and I wonder if she can shift at all.

“Put it on, stubborn girl, for your own good,” Devika suggests. Her tone is cold and full of judgment.

“No,” I respond. “I’m not a fucking doll for them to dress. None of you are.”

“You just don’t want to get on their bad side on day one, Serei,” Nimmy adds in, looking between us. “Do you want to die?”

“I’ve got the feeling saving your big spoilt-princess ass was a waste of my time and resources,” Devika snaps, “if you’re going to throw your life away over a dress.”

I grit my teeth for a moment as I watch her. “Thank you for saving my life.”

“Put the dress on then,” she retorts. “Or not. I don’t give a fuck anymore.”

I have a feeling she does care, or she wouldn’t have bothered to say a word. She is right, despite the fact I hate she is, and I pull my white dress off without thinking on it anymore. Stepping into the red dress, I start tugging on it and flinching from the pain shooting up from my leg. The sequins and the rough material scratch against all my bare skin, itching like crazy as I pull it up and run up the zip on the side. The dress is tight enough to make me feel like it’s suffocating me. I search for my wolf in my mind on instinct, as she hates being contained in anything, but my soul feels empty. Gone. I remind myself it’s the drugs and not real.

I’m stronger than this, and my wolf is part of me forever. We won’t ever leave each other until death takes us to the flames.

The matching red dress hangs off Nimmy’s thin frame. “Do any of you eat?” I blurt out.

Nimmy goes silent, but Devika answers me, walking up to me. She eyes me up and down. “What the hell’s up with you? Everyone I’ve ever known is thin. We don’t have food. No one does. We fight and die for scraps. There hasn’t been food here for years. Over fifty years, so I’ve been told. The whole of America was going downhill way before with food storages thanks to the crazy weather, way before the angel king came and destroyed half our world.”

“So this is normal for you?” I question.

“I’ve seen humans starve in the streets, and counted myself lucky that I was pretty enough to be kept alive for one bastard or another,” she sneers. “We all grew up starving, and yet you walk in here and look like you’ve been brought up like royalty, princess. Have you ever struggled for food? Where the fuck did you come from, because it wasn’t here?”

Even Sophie lifts her head to look at me, with Nimmy and Devika, for that answer.

How the hell do I tell them I appeared in a portal and I’m from across the sea?

When I don’t answer, Devika looks at Nimmy. “She can’t be trusted. Something is wrong about her.”

“Dev—”

“You’re too kind for your own good, Nimmy. She is going to get us all killed,” Devika snaps.

“I will tell you everything, if you want, but not yet. Trust is something you earn, but I’m no one’s slave, and I’m going to get us out of here. Alive,” I state.

She smiles, spreading her large lips. “I tell you what, if you manage to get us out, you’ll have my loyalty for a lifetime. That is a vow I make.”

She laughs as she walks away, but I swear I feel an electric kind of magic in the air from her words, like they meant more than just words and someone heard them.

Sophie’s sweet voice fills the room. “If you get a chance to escape, leave. Don’t risk yourself for us. Run.”

“I don’t run from my vows, and I would never leave you here. Any of you,” I tell her, but she is already looking down at the floor, and it’s clear she doesn’t want to talk to me.

Nimmy places her hand on my shoulder. “It’s most likely going to be a dance in the cage tonight because you’re new. They’re going to use you as the star attraction. Show you off. Raise up bids for you...to have first. It will be an easy night.”

“First what?” I question, even if the answer is screaming in my head.

Her face goes pale. “Males have no souls.”

We all hear the footsteps again as Nimmy runs back to her wall, and seconds later, several locks are unlatched on the door from the other side, and the door is pushed open. The men trudge inside, and one grabs hold of my arm, pulling me along without even blinking at my resistance. I hit out and scratch the man, but he shakes me, and I end up crying out from my leg as it slams into the wall. The pain makes the room spin and my stomach turn to water as I’m dragged along a corridor with a creaking wooden floor. I know humans aren’t meant to be this strong, but in my weak state, they’re definitely stronger than I am right now, even as a shifter. I can barely resist or dig my foot into the floor as they yank me along. We go up a set of creaky wooden stairs that feel like they’re about to give in at any moment, and every step jolts my leg, which is now throbbing, before we come to a thick black door.

The door is pushed open, and loud music floods into my ears, along with the sounds of laughter and chatter. The warmth of the room settles into my skin, along with the soft yellow lighting, and I breathe in the mixture of scents in the room. Most of the people in here are human, but there’s definitely an angel or wolf mixed in here somewhere, hidden well, I expect. Or maybe they are rich, and they wouldn’t be dragged around as slaves.

The fact they are here makes me want to shift and rip them to shreds for betraying their own kind.

No one even blinks as they see us being dragged in, but more than one pair of male eyes look at me in a way that makes me want to puke on them. The room is full of laughter, both female and male, to my surprise. They all wear black suits, and the women have a mixture of grey, white, and black dresses to fit a theme. They all make the beautifully decorated room look dull. I glance up at the gigantic dome ceiling and spiral oak staircases that go off in three different directions to different floors. A massive glass chandelier hangs from the middle of the room, its crystals appearing fake compared to

the real diamonds I've seen in my city. The floors are like a black and white pattern, polished to make them shiny, and in the centre of the room is a table with a fountain. The fountain doesn't have water in it, but instead, red wine.

Nimmy's eyes meet mine as she turns and is guided up the staircase to the left, her back straight, and I swear I can almost scent her fear like it's dancing with my own. My hands shake as I force myself not to be frightened, not to be scared. I won't die with fear in my eyes, but with blazing fire instead.

As the humans drag me up the stairs, my leg smacks into every step, and the pain makes everything around me turn into a blur of colours, and I hear the fabric of my dress ripping as it gets caught on the steps. It turns out my mating dress wasn't the worst dress I was ever going to wear. This is definitely the worst. Heaving through the pain, I lift my head as I'm stopped, and my legs press against the cold stone, which is a relief for a second. Red velvet double doors are pulled open from the inside, and I'm dragged into a dark room with little light other than a beam of white light shining down on a cage on what looks like a stage.

Five males sit on chairs in the middle of the room, a few of them sipping on brown drinks in small glasses. Behind them are several glass windows, filled with people watching, drinking, laughing, and seated right behind the glass.

All of them go quiet to look at me.

The male in the middle stands up, and I recognize him as the human who caught me that night, the one with the scar. "Ah, lovely surprise. I have to say, the white dress you wore when we met fit you better."

I stand my ground, looking him up and down, noticing my dagger strapped to the side of his thigh. "Glad to see you're keeping my dagger close. I will need it when I kill you."

He smiles before laughing hard. He walks up to me, nodding at my guards, who let me go and step back. I struggle to hold my weight on my leg, but I refuse to back down. "I'm your master now, bitch."

“Is she for sale tonight, David?” one of the other males questions.

David grabs my cheek tightly and, in the same movement, punches me hard in the stomach. I gasp in pain and shock, wanting to fall to my knees, but his grip on my chin holds me up as I heave out air. David tightens his grip until I can hear my jaw crunching under the pressure. The pain makes the room spin. “Don’t talk back to me, or I’ll use that pretty little dagger of yours to carve my name into your skin until you scream for me to stop. Then I’ll show you much worse.”

I look into his eyes, so dull yet full of pure evil. “When you die, I hope you scream.”

He laughs and the others laugh with him, making jokes about how much of a stupid little shifter bitch I am. By the fires, I hate them all. David, clearly bored with me now, drags me along and throws me into the cage, slamming the door behind me. I roll across the ground before standing up as quickly as I can, my leg fighting the idea entirely. Music starts playing, not loud but slow melodic music for slow dancing, and goose bumps skate over my skin. I look around at the humans, marking their faces, remembering them, because one day I am coming back for revenge. One day, they’re all going to pay. Every single one of them. I don’t care how long it takes me.

“Dance,” David commands, clicking his fingers at me. “Or make our night very interesting and don’t. But it’s going to hurt.”

I cross my arms. “Try it then. I’m not dancing for a bunch of weak, pathetic humans.”

I instantly regret the words when a buzzing sound fills my ears, and the floor shakes, feeling like a thousand bolts of lightning slam into me. Screaming in pure horror and endless pain, I fall to the ground, which only makes every bit of skin that touches the metal base feel like it’s burning. I scream until my throat feels raw, and yet all I can sense around me is the desire coming from the sick humans.

I scream and scream until it stops, and I don't have a clue how long it lasted. I taste my blood in my mouth, my nose full of it, too, as I cough and cough the blood onto the floor. My arms shake as I lift myself up, and I wonder if I look wild as I face David. "Is that all you've got? Pathetic."

I'd rather die than be their toy.

I expect David to set the buzzer off, but instead, there is silence for a moment. "Do you like pain?"

I neglect to answer him, which only makes him smirk at me. "Aren't you a rare slave, then? Because really, there's not many of the girls that like pain. They become my slave for life if I do that once. I was going to sell you tonight. I've had some high bids already, but alas, I'm definitely going to keep you. Show you to my boss once I've broken you. You could be very interesting, as beautiful as you are, as untouched as you are."

I slowly look him up and down and humourlessly laugh. "Does hurting females make up for the fact you can't get any female to even touch you?"

His eyes flash with anger, his face turning red. "You want pain, bitch? You got it."

This time the buzzer goes off, and the lightning is tenfold. I feel myself screaming and screaming as everything turns to black, and my body shakes on the floor. I can taste nothing but my blood and ash on my tongue. I feel every part of my body go numb right before I'm pitched into blackness. I slowly become aware I'm dreaming because everything's hazy, and I blink my eyes open to see bright sunlight shining through a window nearby the bed. Draycian is in the window, looking out at the city. For some reason, I wonder if he is lonely. He looks it in this moment. A lonely king. There's a painting of a beautiful woman with long black hair, rosy lips, and bright cheeks next to the window, and I walk up to it. She's smiling, and the painting is old, but the painter has done a good job of capturing how beautiful she is. "Who is this?"

"The most painful part of my past," he resentfully replies. "She is dead now."

“I’m sorry. Was she your family?” I question. He doesn’t look back at me, his back tense and his thick muscles pressing against his leather. I sigh, and even in the dream, I can feel the pain in my body as the room sways. I barely blink before I am in Draycian’s arms, his warm chest pressed against mine and his arms tight around my back.

“Someone’s hurt you,” he growls, his voice terrifying. The fury in his eyes is enough to make me want to run away, but he is holding me, and it doesn’t feel as frightening as I thought it should be.

His body perfectly moulds against mine, and I have trouble not focusing on that fact. “Yes. A human.”

“Then all humans die,” he bites out.

I wait for him to say he is joking, but when he looks at me with the same scorching stubbornness I’ve seen twice now, I have a feeling he is not.

“You can’t kill all humans,” I flatly tell him.

He tilts his head to the side and slowly runs his large hand up to the back of my neck. I shiver and clench my legs together, praying for my body to stop reacting to him like a cat in heat. He runs his hands through my hair and grips the back of my neck. “I can. I will. No one will ever hurt you and survive.”

The protectiveness of his voice makes my heart race. The sheer promise in his voice marks my soul.

“This is a dream, and you aren’t really here,” I reply, needing it to be true.

“Is this not real?” he questions, running his hand down my spine, slowly. His hand smooths around my hip, and his long fingers trace over my core, making me gasp in pleasure from the light touch. His eyes blaze with desire, the air thick with it, but I’m not sure who is worse. By the fires, there isn’t a bit of me that doesn’t feel like it’s burning now. He leans down, his lips inches from mine. “If I kissed you now, it would be real. I can scent how much you want me. This is all real, Serei.”

I push away from him, and he lets me go. He leans against the side of the window, crossing his arms and looking too smug. "It's not real."

"You know it is," he replies. "We are fated. You will never feel anything close to how you feel when I'm close. When I fuck you, little wolf, you'll be addicted to me."

"You think mighty of yourself, don't you?" I snort.

He shrugs. "I'm that good. Want to see?"

His eyes flicker to the bed, and my cheeks burn as I look away. "Tell me how you escaped? Who helped you with that portal?"

"It's someone I care deeply for," I reply. "A male who has always been there for me. Unlike you."

His eyes burn like golden flames. "You are mine."

"No, that's exactly your problem. You think I'm yours because magic says so. You never gave me a chance to live and to choose my own life. Why would I ever choose you, anyway? You are the cold, smug dragon king who lives up in a castle and disappeared for my entire life. Where did you go? Why couldn't I live with my mother?"

"You want many answers when you are throwing around untruthful facts," he retorts.

I sarcastically laugh. "When you come to get me, are you going to force me into a mating ceremony?"

"You were never going to be forced into anything," he growls out, coming over to me. He pins me against the window, and I flinch, feeling the pain from my body even here. I want to leave. Deep cracks appear all the way across the walls, sharper and harsher than last time. Like they're not giving us as much time. I wonder who causes the cracks, me or him? I know it's one of us. "You were never going to be forced into anything. I did not want that."

"Then what did you want?"

He roars at me. "For you to be free and safe from the only threats I can't save you from, Serendipity. That's all I've ever

wanted!”

“Who?”

“The Wolven gods,” he replies, cupping my cheek with his hand. “You’re my mate, Serendipity, and the mistakes of my past will get you killed. They will be coming for you.”

“Then get here first,” I ask of him, cracks bursting the walls into pieces that float around us in a black, endless world.

“I will.”

His soft lips press to my forehead as the world goes black, and even though I hate him, I don’t hate the feeling of his lips on my skin all that much.

Twenty-Four



SCREAMS ECHO AROUND ME, *along with pleas for mercy that shatter my heart. The screams get louder until I feel like they are coming from me, and I can't stop. High-pitched and piercing screams that instantly make me want to scream back at them to stop.*

"STOP!" I scream, slamming my hands to my ears, but it does nothing to block out the noise. Suddenly, the screams drift away into silence, and there's nothing but black shadows dancing around me like flames. "Draycian?"

His name echoes over and over, but nothing but the strange black flames move around me in reply. This isn't one of Draycian's mind dream things...so what is it? His dreams never felt like this. My heart pounds, fear spreading its way into the back of my throat right before the shadows start to collect together in front of me, and my Wolven mark burns. The flame-like shadows build slowly into the shape of a man taller than me. He is thin, with dark hair and pale skin, and yet his skin ripples like it's not really here.

In fact, all of him is a mixture of shadows and hollow fire. His piercing black eyes are familiar, the way they are outlined by fire around him.

"Shadow?" I question, taking a step closer, even when every part of me screams at me to run. Something doesn't feel right.

"Yes," he replies. His voice is an echo of the one that I've gotten used to.

I smile tightly. "Have you come for me?"

"Soon," he responds. "You must trust me. Only me. Not the fake dragon king."

Fake?

I walk up to him, each footstep of mine making flames that push the shadows away. It's brutally cold here, which is strange, as I assumed he would be warm with how he visited me in the fires. "Why did you leave me in the human land? It's so dangerous and—"

"A mistake on my part. I am not...connected with my power yet," he replies, lifting his hand made of shadow and stroking his smoky fingers down my cheek. It feels bitterly cold. "Haven't I always cared for you, Serendipity?"

"Yes," I agree, because he has. "I need to know your name, and I need to know what you are. I'm frightened."

The shadows flicker, and a flash of anger brightens his eyes. "My name is Arawn, and I am a Vanir. A god."

"Vanir? I've never heard of that before," I say. "But, Arawn, thank you for telling me that. When you come for me, I want us to tell each other the truth. All of it."

"I promise this to you," he replies. "But first, there will be death."

"For who?"

Darkness fills the corner of my vision, and my body starts falling, even when I don't want to leave. His voice, so like the male I've spoken to every day for so many years, fills my ears. "I am coming for you, my queen. Together, we will rule all, and Vanir will rise once more."

The dream spins away into nothing but darkness before I wake up from the pain of my arm burning from the marking, and I swear under my breath.

But it's not just the marking hurting me, I soon realise. Massive welts cover my back and arms on one side. They sting with every movement, and my leg aches worse than before. I'm back in the bed, trapped in the room, but the

sequined red dress is gone and replaced with the same white one. I don't feel like they have hurt me any more than the lightning cage, but I hate that they no doubt stripped me and had a good look. Bastards.

I look across to see Devika sitting with Nimmy on her bed, talking quietly. Sophie is pouring herself a drink and mixing something, and they all look towards me as I sit up.

“So...it went well with David,” Devika humourlessly chuckles, looking me up and down. “You look worse than any of us on our first night.”

“And that comes from Dev, who bit the ear off one of them,” Nimmy tells me.

“It was worth it. No matter what they did,” Devika replies with a shrug. “Every time I see the asshole, I smile.”

I grin at her. “Maybe I should bite the other ear off.”

“Nah, it's mine,” she replies with a wink.

Nimmy smiles at us both and focuses on me. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” I say. “But I'm done with this place.”

I try to stand up off the bed, but I instantly sway and Nimmy is there, catching me and gently putting me back on the bed.

“They have injected you a few more times to make sure your healing doesn't work quick. So that the punishment doesn't heal too quickly,” she tells me, sighing. “Over time, the effect of the drugs wears off a little.”

I'm not planning on being here long enough for that to happen.

I glance at Sophie, who comes over to me with a glass of water in her shaky hand, and she passes it my way. “Here. It might not have medicine in it, but on occasion I've been allowed to go out and collect herbs. I mixed a few in here. It might help you feel less pain.”

I barely understand what she says as she stumbles over her words. “Thank you. Are you sure you can spare this? Don’t you need it?”

“Not more than you,” she replies with a small smile before walking away. I nod and drink it all, even if it tastes terrible. I like Sophie. Actually, I like all of them. Even Devika.

Silence pours over the room, and I place my empty glass on the floor before I clear my throat.

“My name is Serendipity Fall, and I’m from across the sea. My mother is the alpha female of Fall Mountain Pack, the biggest pack in the world. She fought the angel king in a war, and her mates killed him. I was brought up in a city of dragon shifters not far outside the pack lands for my own protection. I ran away from there because I was to be mated to someone I didn’t know or want to be mated to. Until coming to these lands, I hadn’t been outside the city, and I did not know about the real world. I knew if I went through with the mating ceremony, I would be their queen and I’d never be able to leave. I’d be trapped, forever. A friend made me a portal and got me out of there. I know it was a mistake to leave me here, where it’s so dangerous.” I pause, unable to look at them. The silence is deafening. “So there you have it. I’m the daughter of an alpha female. I’m really, really not from around here, and you’re right, Devika, I’ve never starved for anything in my life except for female friends, I guess, because the only female I’ve known other than my mother is my aunt. There were no other females in the city I grew up in.”

“Please tell me someone will be looking for you,” Nimmy asks, leaning forward. “You’re...well, someone will come, right?”

“Yes. Between my mum’s pack, the angels she has in her city, my friend I mentioned, and the dragon king I was meant to mate to...someone will find me. I’m really not sure who I want to turn up at this point, but right now, we need the help of any of them,” I say, linking my fingers tightly.

None of them say anything else after my blurting-out-the-truth moment, but they just stare at me, and Nimmy is the first

to move. She walks over and goes down on her knees, shocking me. She bows her head. "I knew you were alpha born and from old bloodlines. I could sense it. There hasn't been an alpha on these lands for such a very long time. My aunt and cousin went across the sea, hoping to find the alpha and a real pack."

"I'm no alpha female. That title is earned in a rite, a test of sorts, my aunt explained to me once," I tell her. "My aunt was the previous alpha female of Fall Mountain Pack before my mama."

Devika just starts laughing. "So you really are a spoilt princess."

I shrug. "Kinda, but I don't want the title. You're welcome to it."

She calms down and Nimmy sits back on the bed next to her. "So it must have been shit growing up with a load of dudes. No females? Are they all gay?"

"Nope," I reply. "Dragon shifters wait for their mates and will do for thousands of years."

"Sounds boring," Devika replies.

"They aren't that bad. They're great at fighting and cooking. Surprisingly, I would count a dozen of them as my friends," I reply. "Although, I've never managed to beat any of them in the secret poker games I go to every Thursday night. They are very good at those."

"I bet I could beat them," Devika says, arching an eyebrow.

"I'd literally be your best friend if you did," I say with a small chuckle.

She smiles. "So these dragons. Are they literally dragons, like I've heard in stories as kids?"

"Yes, sometimes. I've seen one of them fully shift before. Most of the time, they just have their wings out and maybe some scales or claws in battle. It's usually a competition over

the wings to see who has the biggest wings. I never really understood it.”

Devika grins. “Males of all races have that primal urge to compare their...wings.”

Nimmy rolls her eyes. “And yet most of them have no idea what to do with it.”

Even Sophie laughs at that, and it makes me feel normal, just for a moment, even in this place. Sophie looks at me. “So this friend that made you a portal... What is a portal?”

“I’m still finding your story hard to believe,” Nimmy says. “It seems too good to be true, but yes, what is a portal?”

“It’s something that can take you from one place to another. Believe in me, just this once,” I ask of her. “And we will get out of here. Hope over fear.”

“Hope over fear,” Nimmy tries the words. “Sounds impossible in this place.”

“I hope not,” I sadly reply.

“Do you know how to fight?” Devika questions. “Immortal dragon shifters must have taught you something.” I nod. “Good, then you can teach us some basic skills. We know nothing about defending ourselves.”

“I will teach you something. As soon as I can stand up, that is,” I reply with a smile that fades a little as I think of my friend who must be so angry with me. “My personal guard, Nako, taught me everything I know.”

“That’s a nice name,” Nimmy comments with a yawn. “We should get some sleep. Freedom, Dev,” Nimmy tells Devika as she stands up.

Devika and Sophie look over at me, but none of them say a word, and I can’t make them believe me for a moment when their lives have been anything but free. I feel foolish and stupid for running away from a life I thought was a trap when they were the ones really in a trap and in pain every single day because of the monsters holding the keys.

I lie down, grunting in pain as I manage to roll onto my side that doesn't hurt, facing Nimmy who is curled up in a ball. I barely close my eyes before I'm falling back into an empty sleep.

I wake up with something being pressed over my mouth, and I immediately hit out. A female grunt echoes in the room. "Stop it and wake the fuck up!"

I pause at Devika's voice and see she is holding a torn piece of cloth over my mouth, and the room is flooded with smoke. She coughs, holding a piece of fabric to her own mouth, and I notice her dress is ripped at the bottom. "The house is on fire. Get up!"

My ears are ringing as I sit up quickly, crying out in pain from my leg and swaying on my feet, the room spinning. After a few seconds, I manage to stand up straight, but Devika stays close, her arm around my back just as the room shakes. We both nearly fall over until it stops, and I cough on the smoke I breathe in. "Where are Nimmy and Sophie?"

"By the door!" Devika shouts back at me and helps me limp over to the door. Nimmy and Sophie are pulling at the handle around a cloth while Sophie is banging on the door for someone to come. Smoke pours through every crack in the damp and horrible walls, and it's so thick in here, I'm struggling to see much. "All four of us need to run at the door at the same time to break it."

I look at Devika and the door. She is right. I nod. "Okay."

Nimmy and Sophie step back just as the door sets itself on fire at the bottom. Giant blue and black flames climb up the door, and I look at them moving so...strangely. "Stay back!"

The flames don't burn me as they cover the floor, and I walk right through them. I swear the heat spreads up my body, and my leg stops hurting so much. I kick the door as hard as I can with my strong leg, stumbling backwards, but the whole door rattles before cracking at the bottom and giving in. The hinges snap and it falls backwards with a thud, the rest of the flames on the floor disappearing in the gush of air.

The girls don't wait as they climb out of the room, over the door, and Nimmy grabs my hand, tugging me out after her. The corridor walls are completely covered in flames, but the floor looks okay for now. But we need to move. No one pauses as we all run down the corridor, coughing on smoke in the air. The closer we get to the end of the corridor, the more we can hear the sound of screams echoing from outside, and they are familiar.

My dream with Arawn. It can't be him doing this...right?

I gulp and push the thought to the back of my mind for now as we climb the old stairs, and I watch as Nimmy grabs the door handle and screams as it burns her hand. "Nimmy!"

"Open it. Fire doesn't hurt you," Devika tells me, holding Nimmy to her side and Sophie on her other side. I grab the handle myself, and it doesn't burn me as I turn it before pushing the door open. The massive room, once beautiful, is completely smothered in flames and dead bodies. The once imposing chandelier is on fire on the floor, several humans underneath it crying out in pain. The flames aren't natural as they climb the walls and seem to dance around the room like they're living creatures. They are blue and black in places, not just red and orange, and nothing about them feels right.

We all rush past the chandelier, and I look up the staircase where the worst of the flames smother the top floor as David comes rolling down the steps before stopping at the bottom and looking up. In the worst of the flames is a male made of black flames, and he flickers in and out as my marking burns along with it.

I look back at the girls, Devika mostly. "Get outside and get to the car park. Try to find a car with keys and no gear stick. Automatics are easy to use. Just put your foot down."

"Got it," Devika tells me. "What about you? Come with us."

I look back at David. "I have something to do first."

Devika looks between us, understands, and she leads Nimmy and Sophie out. Nimmy tries to argue, but she is in too

much pain with her hand and likely knows I'm not leaving yet. Fire can't hurt me.

The shadow tilts his head to me, and I know that stare. Arawn. David follows his gaze to me and sneers as I walk over to him. "Get back in your room, bitch!"

It feels really good as I punch him hard in the face, and he screams as he falls to his knees, the snapping of his nose ringing through the air. I pull my glowing dagger off him, and I slam it straight down into his chest without a thought. I always knew taking a life wouldn't be easy, that it would shock me, but as the life drains from his eyes, I push the guilt aside for one last moment. For Devika, for Nimmy, for Sophie and every girl that has ever been in this place with this monster. I push the dagger higher through his ribs and into his heart, just like Nakoa taught me, before I grab his face so he's looking directly at me. "I told you you'd die by this dagger, and I'm not a liar. I hope Hades burns your soul in the next life and the fires claim you forever."

I tell him to pull my dagger out, and he shakes for a second before going still, his soul leaving for the next life. My hand shakes as I realise what I've just done... I've killed a male.

"Do not feel guilt," the flames purr. "My queen, we will make rivers of blood by the time we are done."

"Arawn, no," I say, turning to him in shock. "I don't want anyone to die. I've told you that."

The flames build higher. "You will do as I tell you."

My heart hurts as I look at him and realise I didn't know him at all. He is just another male who has used me.

How could I be so foolish?

"Don't come after me, Arawn. I will not be your pawn in this game," I growl before running away. His roars follow me out and shake everything around me, sending plaster and brick crashing around me as I dodge them to get out. My leg aches, the pain coming back as I manage to rush out of the doors and into the cold night filled with a million stars in the sky.

“Soon you’ll be mine, and we will be as one,” I hear echoed throughout the mansion behind me, but without looking back, I run down the steps in a white-stoned area, with a forest right behind it. Nimmy is waiting there alone, her bright hair easy to see as she waves a hand.

She waited for me.

My heart warms, even as it breaks. I start to run as fast as I can towards her right before two human males jump out in front of me. Both of them don’t look good, burnt and angry, and much, much bigger than I am.

“You take this one. I’ll get the other,” one of them grunts.

“Run, Nimmy!” I scream at her as the one tries to grab me, but I dodge him, rolling to the side. My training kicks in, and I spin around to face my opponent. He runs at me slowly, and he makes it easy to let my body completely take over with the training that I’ve had my entire life. I run before ducking last minute and sliding right between his legs. I roll to a stop and spin before jumping up onto his back and slamming my dagger right through his neck as he tries to shake me off.

The human falls quickly, and I grunt with the impact, his blood spraying all over me. Another one dead. By the fires, I can’t think about that now. My hand still shakes as I pull my dagger out and start running across the car park to Nimmy, who is plastered to a tree. She hasn’t run. Dammit. She holds a long stick in her arm as the human gets closer, and dread sinks into my heart.

Run, Nimmy! Run!

I barely get a second to scream at her before a car slams harshly into the human, and he bounces off the hood before flying behind it as the car skids to a stop. I am relieved that the human doesn’t get up. The car is shiny red and was likely perfect before now, with the massive dent in the hood. The darkened window rolls down, and Devika winks at me. “You best get in, princess.” A smile tilts my lips, and I almost laugh as I limp across the stones as Nimmy runs to the car, too. I barely get into the back seat before the entire house behind me explodes into flames that splinter up into the sky. As Devika

puts her foot down and drives off, I swear the giant flames
curling up into the sky whisper my name.

Twenty-Five



“I FEEL SO MUCH BETTER NOW, AWAY

from that place,” Nimmy whispers into the darkness of the car, and I lift my head off the window, dragging my eyes from watching the forests we pass. It’s all so beautiful. The sun is slowly rising above the trees, but where we are, it’s foggy and dark still. The shadows only make everything look so dramatic and vivid, and my new freedom feels pointless compared to their freedom. “Like I wasn’t alive before, and now all I want to do is run, scream in happiness, and tell the world I’m never going to be a slave again.”

“Never again,” Devika agrees, venom lacing her words. Sophie is sleeping, but I doubt she wouldn’t agree with their statement. Devika slows down to avoid a bunch of giant fallen branches and potholes in the road before carrying on down the road.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take over?” I question. Truthfully, I don’t think I could drive as well as she has, and I know she has driven before. I have a feeling she has more secrets than she has told anyone about.

Devika looks back at me through the mirror. “You look like you might pass out at any moment, so no, I’ve got this.”

They might be feeling better, but I’m really not, and she is right. If anything, I feel worse with every passing moment. A feeling of sickness rises in my throat, every inch of my body feeling like it’s fighting a constant battle in training. I try to

call for my wolf, missing her so much, but she feels foreign to me now. Almost completely gone.

“Can you feel your wolf yet?” I ask Nimmy.

She turns to me, yawning and flinching in pain from her arm that she has been cradling for hours. “Yes, and it’s relieving. I don’t know what it feels like to shift anymore, but I’m going to when we stop. I need to feel my wolf. You understand, right? Maybe we can run together?”

“Maybe,” I tightly reply. I need to change the subject. “Is your arm okay?”

“I’m not sure. I think I broke it when we were leaving the house when I slipped down the steps on some blood.” She cringes at the memory. She lifts up her arm, showing me in the dim sunlight coming through the trees now and then. “It looks swollen, but shifting will help me.”

I nod, resting back and feeling my heart racing.

“You don’t look good either, unless you always look tired and clammy, Serei. We haven’t known each other for that long, but I don’t think shifters are meant to be paler than the moon.”

I chuckle. “Unfortunately, I’ve got a funny feeling that maybe they gave me more drugs than I knew. I feel weak.”

“Maybe,” Nimmy agrees with soft eyes. I can’t stand the worry in them as her worry makes me completely panic, and I haven’t had a panic attack in...years. The first one was when I was seven, and I passed out in the end. There have been several more of them over the years, and I hate them. It shows I’m weak, even if Nakoia told me over and over it isn’t a weakness not to be able to control your soul’s panic.

That panic is natural.

But finding a way to breathe through it is a true strength.

“So, where are we heading?” I ask Devika, looking at her to find her watching me anyway with those strange eyes.

She looks back at the road. “A safe place to stay. Safe for all of us while we make a new plan.”

“But where—”

I pause as the ground shakes, and a shadow slams into the road ahead of us, shaking the air around him and brushing a million leaves off the trees. Devika puts the brakes on hard, which makes the car squeal down the road as it comes to a stop, jolting us all. I look forward through the fog as the shadow spreads its large wings out and several—five, maybe six—other shadows crash down in the air behind him. The ground doesn't shake in fear of them, though.

I don't need to see who it is, as I feel it in my soul. It's like my blood burns as hot as a star crashing down out of the sky.

“I presume they're here for you,” Devika drawls, looking back at me, but I can't take my eyes off the male standing so close to the car.

I would know him anywhere now.

“Stay in the car,” I tell them, grabbing the silver handle and my dagger in my other hand. The coolness of the handle lets me get some of my strength back, fighting off the dizziness I feel at moving at all.

None of them say anything as I get out of the car, hoping for the best and shutting the door behind me. The slam echoes in the silent forest. It's an effort not to visibly limp as I walk over and stop a few feet away from him.

The dragon king who wanted me as his mate.

The male who haunts my dreams and brings my body to life with one stroke.

Draycian.

He's as handsome as he is in my dreams, but in person, it's hard to even look at him without wanting to fall to my knees. He has black leather covering his body, showing off his powerful muscles, and yet all I can focus on is his eyes. Burning gold eyes. He looks at me, his presence dominating even the air around us, and I don't back down.

“Serei,” Nako's relieved voice fills the air that seems charged with Draycian's energy. I look away just for a second

to see Nakoa walking over in big steps, and then I'm running straight to him, the best I can with the limp. He grabs me the second I'm close and swings me around as I breathe in his scent, a shudder going through me. I missed him. By the fires, I didn't know how much I could miss him.

Nakoa's hand is buried in my hair, his hard body pressed to mine, and I don't want to let go...even if this is the first time he has ever held me like this.

"Step back from my mate," a vexed voice cuts through the air. "Now."

Nakoa lets me go, slowly, like he doesn't want to, and takes a step back as I turn to face Draycian, who looms over me.

"She is hurt," Nakoa protectively starts. "Even if she is trying to hide that limp, I can smell her blood."

Draycian looks at Nakoa like he is seeing him for the first time...like a threat. "I can sense the same, guard. Stand with the others before I make you."

"Don't you dare," I growl.

Draycian looks down at me. "As for you, who hurt you and where do I need to fly to destroy them?"

His possessive tone sends shivers through me. "I'm okay. There is nothing that can't be healed."

I glance at Nakoa and see his expression...which is filled with relief and disappointment that cuts through my chest. The truth is, if he listened to me in the first place, I never would have been so easily manipulated into leaving with Arawn, who isn't who I thought he was. He was never a wolf but a demon, and I don't want to be in his clutches.

He wasn't my friend.

I had a real friend right in front of me the whole time. Nakoa. I should have seen it. Really seen it.

"Serei, answer me," Draycian commands, like I am one of his dragons to so easily control. I pause, my sarcastic response

stuck on my tongue as I read his expression. He is close to completely fucking losing it.

“Were the dreams real?” I softly ask, wishing that Nakoa and the other five dragon shifters weren’t close by, listening.

He takes a step closer to me, gravel crunching under his feet. His massive gold wings spread out like he might pull me in with them and keep me close to him. We have been so close in the dreams that I almost don’t want to know the answer.

Either way, my heart will not stop beating fast.

“Yes,” he says, his voice gravelly and deep. By the fires, this male. “The dreams have been my one source of peace for weeks.”

I hate to admit...they have been mine in a way, too.

“My king, we should move to a more secure place to heal the queen,” one of the dragon shifters suggests, stepping forward. Draycian only lifts a hand, and the shifter goes silent.

“Where have you been?” Draycian grills me once more, and I know he won’t ask *me* again but the girls in the car next until he has his answer. I look behind me, wondering if I still see the black clouds of smoke in the sky, which I just about can in the far distance. I can still smell the smoke, though.

“I was in that fiery building over there.” I point at the cloud. “There’s nothing left but ash now.”

And dead bodies.

Two of them by my own hands. My own blood-covered hands, which the shifters must have noticed along with my blood-soaked dagger in my hand. The familiar sense of panic rushes through me, and I focus on Draycian to swallow it down. I’ll deal with that later.

If I can.

“My fire queen,” Draycian murmurs, his voice filled with pride. He wouldn’t be proud of me if he knew the truth. That I didn’t cause the flames.

I didn’t kill most of the people there, even if I wish I did.

The pride fades as Draycian looks down at me, a cold, guarded expression replacing it. “I know why you left, but you must know how foolish you’ve been.”

“Don’t call me foolish!” I snap at him. “I’m not a child.”

“Don’t be fucking foolish then, my mate!” he sneers right back at me. “And I’m fucking aware you’re not a child.”

“I’m not your mate!” I shout, my cheeks blazing, and a low growl fills my throat as I bare my teeth at him. Then he growls right back, matching me and making it clear neither of us will back down. I barely hear the car doors opening in the distance as a wave of weakness washes through me.

I gulp, thankful for Draycian looking away as Devika, Nimmy and Sophie walk up to us. Sophie looks like she is going to collapse in fear at any moment. Devika looks ready to kill seven dragon shifters, and Nimmy looks worried.

“Did you pick up strays, my mate?” Draycian all but purrs, waving a hand at them. “You know you can’t keep them.”

“Fuck you,” I tell his smug, arrogant face. “They are my friends.”

Draycian stays quiet. Good, he is finally learning to shut up. I can feel the condescending remarks that he wants to fly off for that comment alone, but I am thankful he doesn’t say a word.

I glance at my friends, and they all smile at me. Devika tilts her head. “Do you want to leave with us, Serei?”

“No, she doesn’t,” Draycian confidently replies.

I cross my arms. “Fine, then we’re going to protect them and take them with us back to the city, or I will not go with you.”

“No,” he simply responds. “I don’t do charity.”

Nakoa interrupts. “You could make a deal with—”

“My queen will never make deals with anyone,” Draycian tells him sharply. “Ever.”

“Deals?” I question, feeling like my deal with Arawn is burning through my mark.

“Magic. It’s a gift of mine,” he responds, bored. “They are not coming with us. Say goodbye.”

“Fine then, you will have to force me to go with you, and I’ll hate you forever for it. And I’ll try to escape again. And again—”

“Fine,” he growls, his eyes sparking with fury.

I’m pretty sure he hates me as much as I hate him.

The same shifter who stepped forward before comes a step closer. His pale hair doesn’t match his golden, tanned skin but he is good looking. He is taller than Nakoa but toned and slim. “If he is following us, we need to shield somewhere. We should move, Dray.”

“Agreed, Apollon,” Draycian replies. Dray? The random shifter knows him well enough for a nickname. Interesting. “But there’s nowhere around here with enough magic to shield us. It’s best if we just fly back straight now.”

“One of them is too injured for flying, and the queen is as well. I need time to heal them,” Apollon replies. Not all dragons in the city would even talk to me, and these five were always ones that wouldn’t. I’m happy to know one of their names. I was curious about them, always trying to follow them as a kid, and they would just disappear. It used to annoy me so much. Their black leathers are similar to all the dragons, but there’s a gold symbol on their chest, collars and bands on their arms, and they all carry strange swords that look like they are made of pure diamond. Nakoa always said they are the closest to the king but nothing else about them. He doesn’t even really know what they do.

“I know somewhere where it’s safe,” Devika states.

Draycian looks at her from head to toe, nothing but assessing, before turning to me. “Can you trust her?”

“Yes,” I say because I do. I haven’t made the best choices on who to trust, especially as I hide my wrist from Draycian’s

view, but she saved my life, and we've been through hell and back already. Things like that, they create bonds.

He looks at Devika. "Fine, we will fly after your car. If you're leading us into a trap, you're about to understand why dragons stayed hidden for so long. No one ever speaks of us over on these lands because we kill anyone who betrays our kind."

All of them shoot up into the sky after Draycian, and I watch them fly like stars into the night sky.

Sophie walks close to me on the way back to the car and opens the front door for me to sit there while she goes to the back with Nimmy.

"I fucking hate shifter assholes," Devika states as I pull my seat belt on and she does hers. "Always 'You do this, you do that, or I'll threaten you with death.'"

I chuckle at her deep voice mimicking Draycian.

"Try living with just that your entire life," I tell her.

"No wonder you left," she tells me, and I appreciate that she could understand, just a little.

"But at least your mate has pretty large wings," Nimmy teases, and all of us laugh as Devika starts the engine and drives us away.

With dragons trailing our every move.

Twenty-Six



WE DRIVE for what feels like hours, but the dodgy clock on the dashboard never changes from ten minutes past twelve. The sun has risen high in the sky, and I watched every inch of the sunrise. I breathed in the soft yellows, velvet oranges and dashes of cerise until I could almost imagine waking up every morning and seeing just that, the sunrise, and not through holes in the mountain that did little to show me even a trace of colour. My eyes slowly drift close after a while, exhaustion forcing me into a light sleep until a lump in the road jolted me awake. I lift my head, looking up out of my side window and at the dragons filling the skies above. Three of them fly ahead of us, and every time there is something blocking the road, they move it. The rest fly in a square shape across the cloudy blue sky. They look like shooting stars burning across the world. Not that I've ever seen one of those. Kind of hoped I would one day, but soon I will be taken back to the city, and I won't be able to leave again.

My heart pounds, and I listen to the beat of it as it thumps away in my ear.

Devika yawns softly and I turn to face her, watching as she smoothly turns right and onto an old street, with a big sign that is covered in mud so I can't read what it once said. This street was likely a good place to live once, with beautiful tall houses and tiny white picket fences, long trees marking the road. But now they're nothing but shells, most of them burnt down and turned into rubble that is covered with ivy and moss, nature taking back the land. Old kids' toys are scattered in the road,

like they suddenly left them, and Devika avoids them. We drive down several similar streets, like the houses were all made to match, before we come to a stop outside one of the less ruined houses.

It's imposing, with at least three floors and broken steps leading to a wraparound porch. White panels, which might once have been clean, are now rotting in places thanks to the green ivy and red flowers crawling over the house, all the way to the roof and chimney. The chimney lets out a steady flow of smoke, and instantly I know we aren't alone. Along with the muddy footsteps leading up to the house, with blacked-out windows and a big wooden door. My hand tightens around my dagger. I've learnt quickly not to let go of my weapon when faced with the unknown.

The blade doesn't glow, and I blow out a breath. "This place is safe, right? Is there someone here?"

Devika glances at my dagger. "Wouldn't that tell you if there was a danger to you close by?"

"Yes," I answer. "But who is here, Devika?"

"Trust me," she asks quietly. "I vowed to serve you, be loyal to you if you got us out, and you did. We all would have died down there if it weren't for you. Words don't mean nothing in my culture, and my word is my vow."

"That wasn't a vow I expected you to keep," I tell her as the dragons land around the car. I know they heard every word, and there is no way they haven't checked this entire area for danger before the car even stopped.

"But one I will until the deathless maiden herself comes for my soul," she simply replies, but her words are sincere and unyielding. Deathless maiden? Who is that?

I want to ask, but my door is pulled open, and Draycian offers me one of his large hands. I slide my hand into his, feeling a soft fiery buzz snap through me at the touch, and climb out of the car. Nakoia opens the door for Sophie behind me, his eyes on me, and I resist the urge to look at him for a second too long.

I try not to limp as Draycian lets my hand go and I make my way around the car. The pain becomes worse with every step, taking my breath away, and I stumble. Draycian's eyes flash right towards my leg, and before I even blink, he picks me up into his arms. I try to push him off, but he's like hitting a rock wall. "Put me down. I can walk."

"No, you literally can't. You can limp," he corrects me.

Dragonass.

"Put me down right now, Dray!" I growl.

He smirks, his grip iron tight. "Call me that again, and I'll never let you go, Serei. I like the sound of it on your lips too much."

I glare at him as he carries me over to the others, who are all standing behind Devika, who is whispering a mixture of words in another language like a crazy person and holding her hands in the air.

"What is she doing?"

"Lowering a barrier," Draycian tells me. "And no, I will not put you down."

I should blow out a long, frustrated breath and cross my arms. He looks down at me with a smile that is heartbreakingly pretty before adding, "You're pretty sexy when you're angry."

"You know that I really hate you," I retort.

"I know," he responds, looking pretty satisfied that he's annoyed me even more.

I try not to look angry if he likes it so much.

Devika's chant, which is what it sounds like, gets louder right before there is a buzzing in the air that reminds me of the time Devika made the vow to me, but on a bigger scale. I don't see any difference, but the way Draycian tightens his grip on me, his hands warming like they are on fire, I'm guessing something changed.

Devika pauses, going deadly still as the creaky doors to the house swing open, and in the doorway stands a man who looks very similar to Devika. He blinks. Twice. He's so gorgeous I have trouble taking in that he is real. Gorgeous thick black hair frames his face, and he has pouty lips along with a little stubble. His eyes are piercing blue, a colour I have seen or been able to create with my paints. His body is built, even underneath old clothes, and two long black blades are clipped to his hips on either side. The man looks straight at Devika, and in his eyes, I see the relief and happiness that burns quickly. They're both running at each other within seconds, and they embrace in the middle of the pathway, the male squeezing Devika tightly as she lightly sobs into his shoulder.

"I've looked everywhere for you. I could only sense you a few hours ago, and I knew you'd come to me if I put up a beacon," I overhear the male tell Devika, his voice deep and rich.

"I'm finally free. I was taken by humans, but we can discuss that later," she tells him, and he softly puts her down, placing his hands on her shoulders. "They are dead, before you ask."

"You know me too well," the male retorts. "Shame, I wanted to go hunting tonight."

"I as well, and there is plenty to hunt. Soon," Devika smoothly replies.

Draycian, clearly bored with the reunion, slings his voice across the lawn. "Who the fuck is this male?"

The male looks right over to us, too, casually stepping in front of Devika, who pushes him out of the way and rolls her eyes. "This is my twin brother, Tarrent Bloodsong."

Tarrent keeps his cool eyes on me, and I keep his stare, refusing to back down for a stranger. Or anyone.

"My king, are you aware of what they are?" one shifter asks, coming to Draycian's side. He has thick curly brown hair that matches his dark skin, and amber brown eyes.

"Yes, Leucos," Dray replies, a hint of surprise in his tone.

Leucos hums. "I've not seen their kind in a very long time. I actually thought they were extinct after her death."

"So did I," Dray agrees, his tone tense.

"Stop talking in riddles," I tell the shifters and turn to Tarrent and Devika. "What are you?"

Tarrent crosses his enormous arms. "What your dragon friend is trying to say is that we are witches, and you are lucky to be in our presence. I am a witch lord."

"Witch lords do not exist without a clan to lead," Draycian dismisses him, while my lips twitch with a smile. "With only two of you, it is a stretch to call yourself that."

"Do you want to have a sparring match with words, dragon king?" Tarrent cockily replies, and the air feels electrified with magic. "I have all night."

"Enough," Nimmy says, stepping forward with her arm around Sophie. "I don't know or care about who would win in a fight, but my friends are in pain. Males with any honour would be focused on healing rather than fighting."

Everyone goes silent, and I swear Nimmy has just made even the dragon king feel guilty as he looks down at me.

"Nimmy is right," I say into the silence. "But, Devika, if you're a powerful witch, why couldn't you escape?"

Devika looks away, her jaw tight. Leucos answers me with his soft voice. "Witches were created at a similar time that we were. They were created for nature to make nature thrive, but the goddess Demeter didn't really look too much into her prodigy after the birth of her daughter. The witches started twisting words, feeding magic into their bodies and voices instead. The first witch's voice became more dangerous than any magic in her hands, and her child was born with the magic in his voice, and his child, and so on. Words are their magic. They hold no real magic in their hands anymore, but a carefully worded poem could make you want to jump off a cliff. They can be very persuasive and dangerous because of that."

“If my sister could have escaped, she would have done,” Tarrent tells me, placing his hand on his sister’s back. “But the wolf is right. We should head inside to heal the females.”

“One thing we agree on, witch,” Dray growls, tightening his grip on me.

“You saved my sister’s life,” Tarrent warmly states, looking right at me. “I owe you as much as she does.”

“My name is Serendipity, but my friends call me Serei, and your sister owes me nothing,” I tell him, and this makes him smile.

Devika leans against her brother. “My brother disagrees.”

“Are you mind speaking?” Leucos questions.

“It’s really annoying after a while,” Devika replies. “Don’t be so impressed, pretty dragon.”

Leucos blushes and ducks his head, which makes me want to grin, but I swallow it down.

Draycian’s moody voice ruins the smile, of course. “My name is King Draycian, and this is my queen. You will show us respect. I don’t really care if you’re witches, humans, wolves or whatever else, but you will all die in the same flames if you betray us.”

“Let’s get the females inside,” Tarrent retorts, waving a hand at the house. “I’ve only been here a few hours, but there is a fire warming the back room.”

“It will do,” Draycian growls and looks down at me. “Once your leg is healed, we need to have a talk.”

“I believe we have been talking a lot, your majesty,” I sarcastically reply.

He growls at me, and I swear it’s almost playful.

For a second, I really look at him and then curse myself for looking at all. Draycian walks past Tarrent and straight into the house he doesn’t know, with no care in the world. The house is dim, but warm light floods a room at the back that Draycian heads right to, pushing the half-open door fully open with his

foot. There is a dirty mattress on the floor by a large brick fireplace, and light pours in from gaps in the wooden boards covering the windows.

Draycian carefully lowers me onto the edge of the mattress and grabs my leg, pushing up my dress in no time, and the stroke of his hand sends shivers through me even when I know he didn't mean it that way. Even when I know I'm in a room full of dragon shifters who can scent any tiny bit of desire as well as I can. He doesn't even try to hide the smirk on his face, but he focuses on my leg and the nasty cut down my calf, alongside the many blisters that are on the back of my legs.

Apollon kneels at Draycian's side, looking at the nasty, swollen bullet mark on my leg with a frown and side-eyeing the blisters. "Was the bullet taken out?"

"I took it out and stitched up as best I could," Devika answers, leaning over. "It went deep, and there was man-made poison laced into the bullets to weaken shifters, but she should have healed by now."

Apollon steps closer. "Will you allow me to heal you, my queen?"

"I'm not your queen," I retort.

He simply waits for my answer, and I nod after a slight pause. Apollon places his hand over my leg, hovering above the cut. "This might hurt a little, but it will not take long."

I feel a warmth coming from his hand instantly, and along with it, a spiking pain ripples across my skin. Gritting my teeth, a warm hand slides into mine, holding tightly. I don't need to look to know it's Nakoa.

I just hold his hand tighter.

The pain instantly stops, and I look up, expecting to see Apollon happy, but he is frowning at my leg just as black flames spiral out at him from my chest, snapping like a dragon, and he stumbles back, fire lacing his hands to protect himself. The room goes deadly silent. Any small talk that was going on ended, and Draycian looks down at me.

And then at my wrist, which isn't covered up. The mark on full display.

I can feel the fire storm brewing in the air, and there's nothing, no one, that's going to be able to stop him. "I knew it was Arawn. I fucking knew it. How long have you known him? How long have you cared for him?"

I flinch at his words, repeating what I said in our dreams. I did, maybe do, care for him, but I'm not silly enough to not realise he has lied to me and used me for something. He put me in danger, and he isn't what I thought he was.

I don't even know what he is.

"Since I was a child. Arawn was my friend. He was the only one that agreed with me when I said I didn't want to be mated off to you!" I growl. "He gave me a way out."

"When was it that you finally realised he was manipulating you?" Draycian all but sneers at me, leaning down and grabbing my chin. Nakoa growls, and with a flash of fire, Draycian pins him to the wall with only one flick of his fingers. "Do you even know what that mark is? What your friend is?"

I want to demand he let Nakoa go, but I have a feeling it would get him in more trouble. "He said he needed it to make the portal, to get me out."

"Arawn needed it so he could draw power from you to get himself out. By the fires, you have no idea what you've done. This mark is a death warrant, Serei!" he roars, letting me go and stepping back. "You won't be able to heal, or shift, or use magic. You will die, quickly and painfully, begging for that mark to be gone. That is the fate of anyone who takes that mark."

My stomach drops, and the world spins around me. It can't be true. It can't.

"What is he?" Devika demands. "And how do we break the connection?"

Draycian is pacing, ignoring Devika, and I can't move as Leucos starts talking. "Arawn is a fallen god. A Vanir, like

Draycian. They are the last two pure Vanir.”

“You’re a god?” I question Draycian, who pauses in his pacing to look down at me.

“Yes,” he dryly replies, and I snap. Completely snap.

“How would I know this? I know nothing about you other than your title, and that was because of you. You don’t tell me anything but expect me never to make mistakes. Never try to escape the prison you made for me!”

“Prison?” he barks out. “Was your pillow not soft enough? Not enough of your favourite foods or comforts to grow up with? What the fuck could you have wanted for? You have been brought up like a queen.”

“My family!” I shout back. “You stole me from my mother! You stole the life I could have had there!”

“I did not steal you,” he calmly replies. But it’s like a calmness in the air right before the night drops the world into darkness. “She gave me you willingly.”

“Really?” I state. “Every single year, when I see her, she looks heartbroken when she has to leave. I can’t believe she wanted this.”

“It is complicated,” he replies, ending the conversation, like I don’t have a right to know my own life story.

“I want to know about this Arawn,” Tarrent’s voice echoes into the tense silence. “How do we stop him?”

Draycian glowers at him suspiciously. “Why the fuck would you want to save a girl you’ve just met?”

Truthfully, I want to know too.

“Because I’m bound to her,” Devika smoothly replies for her brother. “And a debt for a debt. A life for a life. I will protect her until we are even, and my clan will always do the same. One debt to a witch is held by all.”

Draycian seems to accept this and runs his one hand through his blond hair. “The Vanir, my race, were created by the goddess Mnemosyne many thousands of years ago. Arawn

was the firstborn, I was the second, and there were fifteen total born on that day, and none ever born since. We were born in the fires in the underworld, a gift from Hades for an old debt, and Mnemosyne asked the fires to shape us into powerful creatures. Dragons.” He pauses for a brief second, and shivers shake down my spine. “We were new gods, born to walk the earth with fire-touched hands and born only male. For a while, a thousand years, everything was fine. There was a massive community by this time. Many had bred with humans, shifters and goddesses to create offspring who were always born dragon males no matter their heritage, but they were not as powerful as the original fifteen.”

I pause before asking anything. “Did you have any children?”

He looks down at me. “No.”

A simple answer, but I feel there is more to it. He clears his throat and addresses the room once more. “Arawn didn’t either, because he was a lover of Mnemosyne, and she was infertile. She took over lovers, both female and male, and all of them suddenly lost their lives not long after. I long suspected Arawn was killing them, but I could not prove it. One night, Arawn killed Mnemosyne, absorbing all her magic in a way he had learnt from a god who’d given him a new power. But killing her, it cast a curse on himself. It cursed all of our people in different ways.”

My voice comes out more guarded than I thought. “Curse?”

Draycian doesn’t even look at me. “Arawn’s curse was that he had to drain people of magic, completely drain them until they died, so he could live. Live off their power, their life force. For a while, while we hunted for him, he slowly killed my people, building up power until he was nearly unstoppable. He could wipe out a whole village of dragons with a single click of his finger, and he did.”

So many horrors shine in his eyes, and I have to look away, the pressure making my heart pound. “How did you stop him?”

“He had hunted us down...so I stole power from gods I shouldn't have ever crossed to save my people. I battled Arawn and won, but he could not be killed. The power he took...it kept healing him, and I knew I had to contain him somewhere he could not steal power from any more of my kind.” He looks at his guards and Nakoa, who is still held by flames against the wall. “I trapped him in the prison in your mother's pack and helped the god Hades and goddess Persephone build their city around it. When it was time, I took the last of my race into what was left of our home and rebuilt.”

“Until now,” I whisper. “Can anything stop him from killing me?”

Draycian looks down at me, his gaze unflinching. “Yes. Me.”

Twenty-Seven

27

TARRENT BLOODSONG

HER BREATHING SETTLES into a light slumber, and I lean against the wall, watching her as she sleeps, like I'm some fucking creepy asshole. She is beautiful, enchantingly so, and if it weren't for her scent, I'd wonder if she were a witch. Her hair is like gold, her eyes as the green sea islands I grew up on, and her curvy body is nearly unbearable. She is fucking gorgeous, and I can't get near her for more than two minutes without the guard or the king stepping in the way. I don't blame them. The king is clearly desperate for her to accept the mating bond, and the guard is in love with her. I don't think she knows it yet. The arguments between her and the king are at least amusing on this trip.

When I feel she is safe and I've whispered enough protective chants around the house that make sure no one dangerous could get in, I stand up. The dragon king sleeps at her side, and I curiously wonder why the king doesn't bear any weapons. He's tremendously powerful. Old, rich magic surrounds him. He is a god, walking this very earth like my ancestors did so long ago. I don't know who I was more surprised to see: her or him. I leave my blanket on the floor with my rucksack and whisper a chant under my breath to make me near invisible to anybody unless they are a witch.

I head outside the poor excuse of a house that stinks of damp and rotten food. No one has been brave enough to go into what is left of the kitchen. The dragon guard, standing near the door, looks back to see the door swing open and curses the wind as I walk past him. Two more guards fly in the

skies above the surrounding forest, searching for any sign of danger. I admire their patterns and how they clearly have trained together to be ready for anything. They never even blink, just follow their king.

I head straight into the forest, embracing the darkness of the long, tall trees as they cover me in their protection. The forest is alive under my feet. I can feel the tremble of power as I touch a nearby tree with my palm. I don't need to ask the forest for anything, but I know that I will be unseen while here. I lower my arm, hearing a branch crack in the distance behind me, and I don't need to turn to know who it is.

“Your sneaking up skills need work, sister,” I state.

Devika appears out of the shadows, eyeing me suspiciously because she is pissed I caught her. She looks tired, and I know she isn't sleeping. Too much troubles her, and she won't let me in like she used to. We were once best friends as well as family.

“Where are you going?”

The look in her eyes is full of fear, and I wonder if she thinks I'm going to abandon her.

“I wouldn't leave you behind, if that's your real question,” I state.

She ducks her head. “I'm sorry, I shouldn't have implied that.”

“Things have changed over the years, and you have suffered. If you need me to reassure you that I'm your brother, I'm never leaving unless you demand it, and I'm going to do a real job of protecting you from now on, then I will. I will tell you that all day,” I tell her. She lifts her head, her eyes full of tears she won't let fall. I've looked for my sister for years, tortured myself over where she could be, and hated myself that I didn't protect her enough. It was like she disappeared from the world and no spells could find her. I was close after tracking down a human who claimed he was invited to a secret party where they had supernatural slaves.

I enjoyed killing him. Slowly.

The broken, cautious look in my sister's eyes nearly breaks me, because she doesn't want to get hurt again. "I have so many things to tell you, sister. Do you remember, when we were kids, what our mother told us of?"

"It was a story to help us sleep," she says, a fond smile on her lips. "That we were the only heirs to a city of witches, and our father would one day come for us. He never did, though, did he? She died in your arms, and we had no one."

I still remember my mother, her long black hair and beautiful blue eyes. She was kind and sweet and not made for this world at all. Humans killed her, and we had no choice but to run.

"It wasn't a story. I found the city," I truthfully say.

A little light comes back into her eyes. "How many witches live there?"

"Many," I softly state. "We are not alone, Devika."

"When I was with the humans, I wished for her stories to be true," she tells me. "That you were really a witch lord and had people who would follow you. I know you are a leader."

"So are you," I remind her. "I will take you there once we are done here with Serei, and you'll be safe forever. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she firmly replies. My sister may act like a tough person, but there has always been this vulnerable side to her. She broke to pieces when our mother died, as did I, and I felt a wall go up around her, and she didn't let anyone else in. So to see the bond that she has with the wolves, it's more than I expected. She truly cares for them.

She only drops her guard around people she really trusts. I ask a delicate question, one that has been burning on my mind. "Are you sure that the males who hurt you are dead?"

"It wasn't just men," she replies coolly, and I try to hide the anger I feel. "And most are dead. The ones that aren't? Once this is over, I will hunt them down."

“I will enjoy hunting with you, sister,” I reply with a wicked smile. I can already feel the magic in my soul, a deep desire to protect any female in my family and get revenge for her being harmed.

“You still didn’t answer me. Why are you out here?” she asks, crossing her arms.

“I needed some fresh air,” I tell her honestly. I pull up my sleeve and show her my mark on my wrist. Her eyes go wide, and I know she remembers the mark and what it means. My mother had one on her wrist. I remember her talking to it like it was alive.

“Is that a true mate mark?”

“Yes. It appeared when I met Serei,” I reply.

Serei is my mate. The only mate I will ever have in the world, and she is far more than I could have imagined.

“How is it possible? She also has another mate?” Devika murmurs still looking at the mark. I lower my arm. “A very possessive dragon king with a massive army.”

“My army is bigger,” I reply. It’s the truth. If he banishes me from seeing her or even tries to get in my way, I will stop at nothing to be in her life. If the mating mark wasn’t there, I’d still want to protect her. I haven’t met a female like her before. She is witty, beautiful, and powerful, along with a body that I have imagined under me more than a few times. I hate any time the king touches her, and it makes me want to snap. He doesn’t deserve her, and nothing he has done so far has proven he has. He kept her locked in his city, far away from her family, and only let them see her once a year by the sounds of it. No wonder she tried to run away from him and ended up putting her life in danger. Everything is very complicated, and more important than any mate bond is finding out a way to stop Arawn from killing her. The last thing we need is a hellbent fallen god draining her life, and every hour she looks worse.

“This is fucking surprising,” Devika says, shaking her head. “The gods have truly fucked you all over.”

I have lived for hundreds and hundreds of years, never, ever expecting to find a mate. True mates are rare, as my mother told it. “It is a blessing.”

“She’s dying, Tarrent,” Devika reminds me. “A dying mate is not a blessing from any goddess.”

“We fight for her any way we can,” I respond. “She is mine. I won’t give up on her.”

She comes to my side and pats my arm. “You’re still fucked, but I’m on your side whatever comes.”

“Good, because I want to show you something,” I reply, offering her my arm. She hooks her arm through mine and walks with me through the forest. We walk for a good half an hour, the magic of nature guiding my way in the pure darkness. I know Devika feels the magic as I do, and she seems to relax the deeper we go into the forest. When the magic is heightened, we stop in a big clearing full of fallen leaves. I let my sister go and hover my hands in the air before I begin to chant. The ancient words roll off my tongue, magic amplifying and listening to my call. The magic swarms around me, and I channel it into the ground in front of me. Hundreds of leaves float into the air, making a massive circle before stretching out. In the middle, a glossy ripple of water appears, and through it, a very familiar female stands up from her seat. Her deep purple gown spreads across the floor as she walks to me and bows her head. Her dark skin makes the purple stand out, and her black hair lies in braids down her back.

“My lord, it is good to see you. Blessed be the goddess for this,” she says, turning to look at Devika. “I take it you found your sister? How blessed we are.”

“This is Cicely of the forest clan,” I tell Devika. “And Cicely, this is my sister, Devika Bloodsong.”

“It is an honour,” Cicely tells her before looking at me. “Do you wish for me to channel a portal back to the city? I can gather the hundred witches immediately.”

“No,” I say, making her frown. “It seems the goddess has seen to bless me in many ways. I found my mate.”

“This is wonderful!” Cicely replies, pure joy in her brown eyes. “But why do you look so sad, my lord?”

“It is complicated and the reason I cannot return yet,” I explain. I give her a short explanation of everything that has happened and who Serei is.

“Indeed, it is complicated. Surely Lady Devika will help you through the murky waters of this blessed mating,” Cicely finally says.

Devika’s tone is cold. “Did you know my mother?”

Cicely looks down. “No, but I knew there were two heirs, and our dearly departed lord would speak of his mate. She left our city before your birth, and we never found her, or you two, until Lord Tarrent found us.”

Devika looks away. It wasn’t the answer she wanted, and I didn’t want to tell her it. Truthfully, our mother was never quite in the right mind to make sane decisions. We starved as children more often than not, and our mother didn’t notice because she was often lost in her mind.

Cicely looks at me, and I shake my head. “I called for more than an update. Get the armies ready for a possible war. The fallen god will bring destruction to this world, and we will not sit on the sidelines this time.”

“Of course. Is there anything else you need?”

“I will call if there is,” I reply.

“Blessed be, both of you. You will be in my prayers to the goddess,” Cicely kindly says right before I close the portal and cut off the magic. The forest is silent as I watch my sister.

She eventually lifts her head to face me. “They could have found us, if he wanted.”

“He was a lazy male, from what I’ve heard. He hid when the angel king burned the world down and refused to let any witch help in the later years when the wolf queen searched for aid. He simply watched, and that was my mate’s mother,” I quietly say and look up at the stars above. “This time, the

witches will not stand on the side. We will fight for us, for shifters and for my mate.”

“For your mate,” Devika agrees. “And for a safe future.”

“Shame we don’t have a drink to toast this with,” I grumble as we head back to the cottage.

“Want to brave the kitchen?” she questions. “Big brave witch lord?”

I bump her shoulder with mine, making her laugh. She rests her head on my arm, and for now, I let myself enjoy having my family back.

Twenty-Eight



UNCLOUDED RED WATER SURROUNDS ME,

up to my waist in the white dress I'm wearing, slowly dying the fabric a soft shade of pink. The water is still, and I look down at the bottomless pits, confused at how deep it looks. I'm slowly sinking, I soon realise as my hands slip under the water. Even though the water is completely still, it feels like thick mud latching onto my body, refusing to let me move an inch. I stare around me at the blue skies hanging high above me, the weird scent of fire and ash in the air.

And the scent of blood, which I try to pretend isn't coming from the water.

"Dray?" I call, my voice echoing around me until it sounds like a hollow laugh. Everything feels wrong, and I know it's not a dream with Draycian this time.

"Arawn?" I question, and this time my voice doesn't echo at all. Arawn walks towards me, and how I thought he was anything but a fallen god, I don't know. Maybe he hid who he really was in soft promises and acts of fake friendship until I couldn't see who he really was until it was too late. Dark power ripples off him, even in this dream state, and I shudder as I try to move in the thick water. He walks on the water towards me, each step a deep splash, and he's not sinking below it like me.

He towers over me as he crouches down and offers me a hand. "I can help you rise if you wish, my queen."

I don't take his hand, content to drown into this thick muddy water rather than take anything else from him. He is a murderer. A monster.

My heart still hurts, because he was my friend, and now every single moment I look back on seems like it was all a play on my emotions and vulnerability to get what he wanted. To escape a prison he deserved to be placed in.

He's less shadow and flames now, and more solid man. He's still lankier than I would have expected him to be, but his shoulders are wide, and he is tall. He has thick black hair, but it lacks the shine of Tarrent's, and his eyes and nose are completely empty of the flame I once saw. There is nothing but still darkness and I wonder if the flame was what I wanted to see.

He tilts his head in a way that's pure supernatural and pure predator. "Did you not miss me?"

"Not when I learnt what you are. What you did," I say, my voice cracking. "I cared about you, and you are nothing but pure evil. You used me. You still are."

"What sweet stories has your precious mate told you?" he counters, watching me so closely. "Do you trust him now? Believe him?"

"Yes," I reply. "Because I can feel the truth of his words. I'm dying and it's you who is slowly killing me."

"Wasn't it him that trapped you in that city all those years?" he replies, ignoring my answer completely. "Are you not so thankful to me anymore?"

"No," I bite out. "You manipulated me, and we both know it. Stop playing this game, Arawn, and let me go."

"Never," he replies with a wide, creepy grin. "You are different. You're mine."

"I'm not and never will be," I reply, a trickle of fear pouring into my heart as quickly as I'm sinking into the water.

"Haven't you figured it out yet?" he questions, reaching out to touch my cheek, and I struggle to avoid his hand. He

cups my cheek like a lover and leans down close to me. “Ah, you have not. You will very soon, and we will be together.”

He leans a little closer, like he is going to kiss me, and I coldly laugh. “You’re never, ever going to be anything to me. To anyone, Arawn.”

He lets me go with a huff of a laugh, and I can only watch him walk away from me, wondering what the hell he was going on about, right before my head goes under the water. I slowly start to drown, and I feel it filling my lungs like a thick paste. I can’t breathe.

I wake up with a gasp, feeling like I am still under that water, clawing at my throat with my hands until I take in the warm room, the sound of my friends sleeping, and the dragon guards outside. My body sways with a wave of dizziness, and I nearly fall back down, but a warm arm wraps around my back and my waist. Dray hardly looks awake as he looks up at me, holding me tightly, his one wing outstretched behind my back to hide me from anyone but him. It’s been three days since he found me, and we’ve travelled quite a far distance to the edge of the land where there is nothing but thick forests and the abandoned little cottage the shifters found. We’re flying tomorrow. Now we are close to the coast, and it’s apparently safe to say Arawn isn’t close by.

I almost want to tell Dray about the dream with Arawn, but I keep it to myself. No need to make him angry and deal with his grumpy dragon ass.

He looks up at me with those alluring gold eyes of his, and I stare for a fraction too long. The silence is too much. “I’m nervous about flying that long distance.”

“Is that the cause of the bad dreams?” he questions, his voice groggy. He rubs a hand over his face. “Bad dreams haunt us all, but they are not real, Serei.”

“So you’re not going to drop me in the ocean?” I reply with a small smile.

His lips tilt up. “Don’t tempt me with the idea.”

I know he is teasing me, but considering how much of a pain in the ass I've been for him—you know, releasing his arch enemy and risking all our lives—I wouldn't be that surprised if he did. Draycian said it will take us four days if we fly directly and in full dragon form. But the idea of riding on top of a dragon for four days doesn't exactly appeal to me.

I clear my throat. "I didn't fall asleep next to you."

I look over at Nakoa, who I did fall asleep next to, and the space where my sleeping bag was is empty. "He's your guard and my subject. I wished for you to be close while danger is in the air."

"Arawn?" I whisper.

"No, much worse than him," he replies with a tight jaw.

I glance at Nakoa again, realising that I'm still holding on to some delusional fantasy of him that I have. That he could ever see me the way I see him. That he would ever risk his place in the city, with his people, for me. Dray would try to kill him, and I wouldn't let anyone hurt Nakoa. Loving him like I do is only going to destroy me when he finds his mate.

"You have every feeling, every emotion, written on your face at all times," Dray tells me, but he isn't looking at me now. He stares at the ground at his feet. "A dangerous trait for a female like you."

"A soon to be queen, you mean," I respond.

"You were born a princess, even without your tie to me," he smoothly replies. "You would have had to fight for your place in the pack your mother and her mates rule. They would, and still will, see you as an imposter compared to your little brother."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of who your father is, Serei," he replies. "Someone would have tried to kill you because of it. The pack is rich in traditions and rules."

"Was this the reason you took me in?" I ask. "Or one of them, outside of being your mate?"

“I protected you because I am cursed. Do you ever wonder who cursed me?” he quietly questions. “What I did?”

“What is the curse?”

“No more chatter,” he replies with a tired yawn but he looks around us, like someone is listening and he is done whispering his secrets. “It’s too early.”

“Ah, so you’re not a morning person,” I reply. “Noted.”

“Careful,” he purrs, leaning in. “That comment makes it sound like you plan to stay close to me.”

His tone, the wicked seductiveness of it, makes my heart feel like it might beat so fast it could break me.

“You haven’t told us where we’re going,” I say to change the subject.

“Our home,” he replies.

“I mean after that, and you know it,” I retort with a flash of annoyance. That only makes him smile. His wing stretches around my shoulder as he sits up and lets me rest against his wing for a second. I reach out to touch his wing on instinct, not really thinking about it. He pauses, his body going absolutely still, as I run my fingers over one of the larger gold veins, tracing it slowly. So soft.

I wasn’t expecting the wings to be soft like velvet.

“Does it hurt too, like your body would hurt, if these are injured?”

“Yes, they’re very sensitive,” he replies through gritted teeth. I turn to him, realising exactly what he means when I pick up on his scent. I lower my hand, and he grumbles something about torture as he stands up and stretches his wings out before tucking them neatly behind him and making them disappear entirely. I notice he rearranges something else too, and I try not to let my cheeks burn too much as I take in the size of that part of him. Dray goes over to the corner, past the others who are sleeping in clusters around the large open space. Two fires have been built, filling the room with warm light and chasing away some of the cold chill of the air. I still

don't take my blanket off my legs or pull myself out of the sleeping bag. Some guards are posted outside this cute little cottage, watching over to make sure no threats even get close, and I see their shadows in the windows. They all do rotations, and they don't even seem to discuss it. They just seem to know, and I admire how close they all are.

Draycian comes back a few minutes later with a glass of cold water and a piece of strange chewy cake that he managed to find. It is wrapped in plastic of sorts, and the sell by date on it is years past, but it still tastes nice as I bite into it. Very sweet.

Draycian makes me pause as he leans over and picks up a strand of my hair. It's not blonde, it's jet black, and I take it from his hand. "What the fuck?"

"Part of Arawn's curse," Dray tightly replies. "We are running out of time."

The food suddenly tastes horrible, dread curling in my stomach as I put it down and attempt to drink some more water.

"Did you know they live like this? The humans and odd supernaturals over here?" I quietly question. My eyes stay on where Nimmy and Sophie are asleep.

"Yes," Dray tells me. "It wasn't always like this for this country. Time has not been kind to this part of the land. Before your time, slavery was the biggest trade for food with the angel king. Now that is gone, there are no leaders to make deals with the courts across the sea or your mother's pack."

"Therefore, no one can really help them," I fill in the rest. "The gangs run most, from what I've picked up. They don't seem to be short of food."

"I doubt all slavery ended when the war came to an end," he replies.

I know it didn't. There are four previous slaves in this room alone. I move my sore leg, groaning at the pain. "Did you help my mother in the war?"

"For you, yes," he replies.

“Not just because it was the right thing to do?” I counter with an arched eyebrow.

“I’ve lived through so many wars, so many rulers who all claim to be doing the right thing. I never wish to side with any of them when my own enemies are watching,” he replies. “They thought I was dead until that war, until I changed my mind and fought alongside your mother’s pack.”

“Thank you,” I tell him. “For doing that. For me, as you put it.”

“You would have died if I didn’t,” he replies coolly, and for some reason, I don’t doubt him.

“When this is over...can I see my mother’s pack? Go there for a while?”

“Maybe,” he replies and looks down at me with a guarded expression, the walls going back up. “But only for a short time. It’s for your own pr—”

“Yeah, I get it,” I snap and turn away from him.

He laughs low. “There I was, believing you could be reasonable and not act like a spoilt princess.”

I growl at him as he gets up and storms out, slamming the front door and waking everyone up. Dragonass. That is his permanent name at this point. After the lovely wake-up call, the shifters start packing, and I practise standing on my own for a little. I catch Nakoa watching me like a wolf, making sure I don’t fall, and I know he’d be there in a second to catch me if I did. I make myself walk over to him—well, limp—and sweat pours down the back of my neck from the effort.

“You should rest, Serei,” Nakoa suggests, pouring water into plastic bottles to pack into the travel bags.

“Can we talk—”

“Hi, I’m Nimmy,” Nimmy says, stepping to my side and offering Nakoa her hand.

“Nakoa,” he replies, taking her hand and shaking it with a smile. “I am Serendipity’s guard. To what end, I do not know.”

“Hey,” I say, but he shakes his head and walks away, carrying the bag.

“By the wolf, your life is complicated,” Nimmy quietly says. “Good thing sharing is part of our nature.”

“I know. My mother has four mates,” I tell her.

“Lucky mum,” she smiles. “I’d be happy with just one of these handsome shifters. I love the overprotective alpha natures. The wings are interesting too.”

I chuckle at her. “Are you nervous about flying?”

“I’ve been thinking about it all night, and I’m not sure,” she says. “But I’d do anything to leave this country and get to where my family might be.”

“We could ask my mama to look in her pack for your aunt and cousin when I can,” I suggest. “I mean, if they got there, that’s the pack they would have gone to. I remember my mum talking once about a massive boat full of wolves from the human lands, but I think that was only a few years ago. If not, there are courts to search who welcome wolves, humans, and angels. I would ask her to find them if you could tell me their names.”

She takes hold of my hands. “I’d really appreciate that, more than you could know. I never thought I’d see them again, and they likely believe I’m dead.”

“Nimmy, do you want this coat?” Apollon calls over, holding up a thick blue coat. “I found it upstairs.”

Nimmy kisses my cheek before leaving, and I hop my way back over to where the clothes I have are. I pull the worn jeans over my dress, then a thin cardigan and red coat with a thick furry hood. The coat has gloves in the pockets, two pairs, and I take one out to wear and look around until I find Nimmy and Sophie talking with Devika.

Devika catches my gaze and walks over. “Need a hand up?”

“Pitifully so,” I say, and she chuckles before grabbing my hands and pulling me to my feet, as shaky as I am. “Here, I

have some spare gloves.”

“I don’t need them. A simple spell will keep me warm,” she explains. “I would use my magic on you guys, but it reacts strangely with shifters.”

“Got it,” I say. “Well, can you see if Sophie or Nimmy want them?”

She takes the gloves and heads over as I look at the door. “I can do this.”

“I highly doubt it,” Tarrent murmurs behind me, stepping close. “May I help?”

“Does the oh so powerful witch lord have time to help a wolf?” I question.

He laughs, the sound lovely to my ears. “For a princess, yes.”

I roll my eyes but happily let him pick me up in his arms, his musky midnight and frost-coated berries scent wrapping around me. By the fires, he smells good. Too good.

“What is a witch lord, then?” I ask as he walks us across the room and to the front door. I don’t think he is going to answer me until we come outside the front of the cottage, the bitterly cold air brushing my skin.

“You’re a wolf, and you have alphas, right? Dragons clearly have kings or queens. We have lords or ladies,” he explains.

“So, you’re like royalty to your people?”

He looks down at me. His eyes are so bright, the blue and specks of black so vibrant. “Yes.”

“Dray said your race was—”

I go still, my words fading off as I feel a different kind of coolness in the air. I look into the thick forests surrounding the cottage, where there are shadows so dark they are impossible to see through.

Until the shadows ripple and the dagger in my coat begins to glow.

Tarrent's grip tightens on me, and I look to Draycian, who is standing with Apollon and one of the guards, all of them watching the same spot we are. Dray looks over at me. "Get her in the house. Now."

Tarrent doesn't move; instead, he places me on my feet and moves slightly in front of me as Devika comes to my other side. The shadows continue to ripple until the taste of smoke fills the air and the shadows shape into burning flames.

Black flames take the shape of three wolves, bigger than I've ever seen any wolf to be, and they burn the ground with every step they take towards me. They growl low, baring their white teeth within the flames.

"What the fuck are those?" Devika questions.

Tarrent looks at me for a moment, and when I turn back, one of the wolves is racing towards us while the other two head for Dray and the guards.

Tarrent only smiles before he chants under his breath, looking dead at the creature. My eyes widen as the wolf halts, digging its paws into the dirt ground, and begins to rise into the air. Devika begins to chant on my other side, and suddenly the wolf begins to howl. Tarrent strolls to the wolf, pulling out his two black swords and leaping into the air. With a deadly jump, he flies down on top of the wolf with his swords down first, and the wolf's head splatters onto the ground, the body dropping seconds later. Tarrent effortlessly lands and gives me a bow. "Your safety is secure, princess."

I chuckle and look over at Draycian, who is covered in thick black blood, a dead wolf at his feet. The other is in pieces, Apollon and the other guard looking like they barely moved an inch.

Draycian is storming over to me within seconds and looking me over for any injuries. "A present from Arawn, I suspect?" I ask.

Draycian snaps out of it. "Yes. Darkness wolves are shifters who have had black flames breathed into their mouth, and it turns them into slaves like these."

“They were once shifters?” Nimmy whispers from the door, looking pale.

He nods, and I look at what is left of the shifters. “We will bury them before we leave.”

“No, we have no time,” Draycian growls. “This is a teaser of what he will bring next time. We need to leave.”

Dray clicks his fingers, and the wolves begin to burn with vibrant orange flames, soaring into the sky. Anger starts to rise up within me at his disrespect. “Bastard.”

Draycian’s grumble shakes the surrounding trees. Tarrent comes up to me, handing me three flat stones. He covers my hand and utters some words I don’t understand before letting go. The three stones glow blue in my hand, and they are beautiful.

“There is an old tradition of laying a glowing stone at the grave of the dead. These aren’t the same as you’d find on the beaches, but close enough,” he softly suggests. “They were your people, no matter if you didn’t know them.”

Nimmy comes to my side, with a sadness in her eyes. She walks to the bodies without looking back after I slide two of the stones into her hand. I look up at Tarrent. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, princess,” he replies with a wink before stepping aside. I walk up to the burning body of the wolf and send a silent prayer up to the old gods and the never-ending fires that this wolf will finally find some peace.

I hear the sound of birds chirping in the surrounding silence, and I look up at the rising sun, pretending that I’m not being taken back to my prison. My hands start to shake as I stand there, and I hide them at my sides, flattening my palms to my legs.

I taste the magic in the air, feel a disturbance in the very fibre of the world, before I even turn to watch the dragons shift. When I’ve shifted, it’s quick and effortless, like breathing. It turns out the dragons and wolves have that in common. But still, it feels like the air is being sucked straight towards them and it is spiralling with strong magic that tastes

like flames and ash. Soon there are nothing but gold swirls of magic smoke in front of us before there are three gigantic gold dragons a few feet away. Draycian is all I can focus on, like he is all there is to this world. He's covered in gold scales, lighting up nearly all of his body, which is huge and about the size of the cottage behind me. As if he knows I'm staring, he seems to lift his long neck, and his tail wraps around his back legs to rest near his stomach to show off. Massive wings are folded at his side, and he has high pointed ears, a long face, but his eyes are the same in this form. Much like mine are when I shift.

He leans down, and even in dragon form, I can tell he is telling me to hurry the fuck up.

Tarrent, without a word, lifts me up into his arms, and Dray growls lightly at him, but Tarrent doesn't even care as he walks up to Dray. I run my hand across his glittering gold scales, and I swear I hear a noise almost like purring radiating from his chest. Tarrent chuckles low.

Like I weigh nothing, Tarrent's big hands wrap around my waist, and he lifts me right up onto the wing before jumping up himself and helps me climb up, my leg protesting the entire time. I settle into a space between some larger scales where I can hold on, and Tarrent helps Devika climb up after us. One more guard, Nakoa, Nimmy and Sophie are split between the other two dragons, and I glance over just in time to see Sophie pass out in Apollon's arms. He sighs and picks her up, using his wings to fly onto the dragon's back while keeping Sophie close.

I'm a little surprised as Tarrent moves to sit right behind me. His body is completely pressed up to mine, and his hands grip the scales even outside of my thighs, so close his thumbs brush my thighs.

I turn my head back, and he arches an eyebrow at me. "I bet the princess of dragons isn't bothered by a dragon ride."

"Never been on a ride," I say, and he gives me a smile that can only be described as cocky.

"I can take you for a ride anytime, princess," he purrs.

“Ew, I’m right here and related to you,” Devika interrupts, and I turn back, my cheeks blazing. The dragon under us, my intended mate, doesn’t sound impressed either, judging by the growl. At this rate, Tarrent will be lucky if Dray doesn’t drop him in the ocean.

He leans forward, his lips brushing the back of my ear, and I shiver, surprised that he remained close to me. “Don’t worry, you’re not going back to another trap. You’ll never be trapped now, not when you’re part of my clan.”

For some reason, knowing someone has my back who isn’t a dragon shifter, makes me relax a little and pushes away the panic.

I lean back into Tarrent as Dray spreads his wings and begins walking forward. He suddenly jumps on top of the cottage before jumping into the air above the tall trees. The cottage roof breaks underneath his massive claws, and I gasp from the cold air, thankful for Tarrent’s body pressed against mine and the heat coming from him. Dray flaps his wings hard, sending us straight up through the clouds with the strength of his huge body until we are gliding above the clouds, nothing but bright skies and the sun to shine on us.

It’s still freezing, and I know I’m not going to be able to feel my toes by the morning.

The sun kisses the clouds, and it’s beautiful. I can’t do anything but stare until teardrops drip down my cheeks. A warm hand leans up and wipes a tear away, and I turn to see Tarrent lick the tear from his finger.

“Just as I thought,” I hear him murmur, but I look away at the view, not letting the witch lord distract me. Even with his thick arm around my waist, and my dragon between my legs.

* * *

It takes four days. Four long, cold, and exhausting days to get back to the city, and I don’t remember all of it, thanks to the dizzy spells and passing out way too often. Tarrent looks after me the entire time, waking me up to eat and drink, holding me

when I'm freezing. I don't know how any of the dragons are still flying without needing to stop for a sleep. We only stop twice a day to pee, and that's only for no more than ten minutes. The last few hours, it's been clear we must be close to the city because Draycian has gone lower and not stopped us for a toilet break. We suddenly spiral down, and I grab hold of scales tightly, scared of being pushed off in the current. Draycian softly lands near a rocky area of grass, the cave entrance to the city ahead. Not that I've ever seen it from here before. I look at the small hill, knowing if I was strong enough to climb it, then I would be able to see my mum's pack.

It's right there.

And I'm too weak to even climb off Draycian.

Tarrent helps me get off the dragon while carrying me, and Devika climbs off next with the bags, dropping them on the ground and stretching. "Well, that was a trip from hell. I can't feel my cheeks, and my lips are chapped. Urgh."

I chuckle at her as I look over to see Nimmy being helped down by Leucos, and Sophie's being carried by Apollon, but she is awake. They both look as exhausted as I feel. Dray and two dragons shift back into completely and utterly naked shifters with impressive bodies. I've seen the shifters naked now and then, around the city when I was older. It was during that time I realised I like males and wanted to see what they looked like. Shifters do not give a shit about nudity, but personally, I like to keep my clothes on.

Dray doesn't care one bit as he walks over to us. "Give her to me."

"I'm not yours to command," Tarrent replies, his tone unmovable.

"I'm way too tired for an argument, but I'd prefer to be held by the fully clothed male for now," I say, even when my body does not agree with that statement at all. I purposely try to keep my eyes above his waist, above the rippling six pack and the V-shape that goes down to—

I clear my throat. His chest isn't any better. It's a swirl of tattoos and markings, muscle and golden skin that looks very lick-able.

My changing scent does nothing to make me look innocent in this, but Dray doesn't comment on it as he stalks away for the entrance, the other naked guards following. I'm certain I'm not the only one who looks at their firm asses for a moment too long.

Tarrent looks too smug as he smiles down at me, and I turn to Nakoa, standing close. "Will you carry me in?"

Nakoa picks me up out of Tarrent's arms, glaring at him the entire time, and I try to ignore everyone looking at me.

Devika breaks the tense silence. "Now, you never told me about the nakedness. I'm completely sold on this place now."

Tarrent looks disgusted and Devika winks at me.

"They aren't always naked," I tell her.

"Shame," she replies. "I've always loved a naked shifter. Plus, they fuck like gods."

My cheeks burn as she follows her brother in, and Nakoa barely looks at me, his cheeks as red as mine.

We all follow them into the cave, past a sphere made of gold with fire within and into another corridor that reminds me of the place I come to see my mum once a year. The sight of the city takes my breath away. Its beauty always does, and I find myself just staring until I feel a gaze on me. I look up at Nakoa, who gently tells me, "Don't run, or at least tell me your plans. I'm sorry if I ever made this not feel like your home and that I wasn't on your side."

The words I've always wanted to hear...but with the mark on my wrist, my death looming close by, they don't hold the meaning they once would have done.

"Maybe walking her into an arranged marriage with someone she hasn't met wasn't a good way to be a friend to her," Tarrent drawls. "It was a shitty thing to do."

"Watch it, witch," Nakoa threatens.

I look over to see Dray clipping a gold cloak around his shoulders, pinned with a dragon clip in the middle.

He goes to say something, but Aunt Reine barrels past him, her black hair spiralling behind her in the air. She runs straight up to me, cups my cheeks, and kisses my forehead, a ragged breath of relief blowing out of her mouth.

She leans back, her eyes frowning as she really looks at me. “What in the name of the gods have you done to her?”

Her fury dims as I touch her shoulder. “This is my own mistake.”

“Foolish girl,” she whispers, tears filling her eyes. “Do you have any idea how worried we have all been? Your mother is out of her mind with panic, as are her mates, as are your uncle and brother.”

I look at the dark shadows under her eyes, her pale skin. I wonder if she slept at all since I left. Guilt swallows me whole.

“He’s a kid,” I retort, not knowing what to say.

She glowers at me, and it kinda makes me feel more at home. More than the panicked Reine, who makes me feel the guilt simmering below the surface.

“None of us were right or wrong, but it is done now,” Draycian cuts in.

“Tell me everything. Now,” Aunt Reine commands, sounding like the previous alpha female who commanded so many.

Surprisingly, Draycian fills her in on everything and somehow doesn’t blame me for it all. “I have one last way to save her, and it’s dangerous. Risky for everyone. This goddess could very well decide to just kill us for power or to impress Arawn.”

“Then do it,” Aunt Reine suggests. “She cannot die. I will give up everything, even my life for hers.”

“Reine,” I whisper.

“The sentiment is shared,” Dray replies, surprising me. He would die for me? “There is a goddess, old and wise, but nothing much more than bones anymore. She may be able to break the bond for a price.”

“What would the price be?”

“Whatever it is, I will pay it,” he quickly replies. “I am already cursed, and it will be for the only thing I do not want to lose.”

He shoots into the sky, far above the city, and we all stay silent before Aunt Reine finally takes in the new additions to the group.

First, she looks at Apollon who has handed Sophie to another guard. “Send word to the wolves that Serendipity is alive and well, and I will come to explain everything soon.”

“Of course,” Apollon replies, flying off seconds later.

“Who are they?” Aunt Reine asks me, still holding my arm like she can’t bear to let me go.

“Friends,” I tell her.

“You made friends with two witches, a wolf and a half wolf already? Where did you find them?”

I blanch. “Nowhere good.”

“You will tell me everything, but after I have looked after you,” she commands, looking over at three of the guards waiting nearby. “Take the newcomers to the castle and find them rooms and food. They are to have guards outside their rooms at all times.”

“Understood,” one of them replies.

“Look after them,” I ask the one in the middle.

He lowers his head. “With my life, my queen.”

A bit dramatic, but alright.

Considering a fallen god is hunting me, it might be a promise they will regret.

“Where can you get a good drink?” Tarrent questions the guards.

“I’ll take you to a bar,” one of them suggests, nodding his head to the steps up to the city.

Tarrent looks at me before he leaves. “Call my name if you need me, princess.”

Nakoa growls. “She won’t.”

When everyone is gone except Reine and Nakoa, I lower my head. “I’m so sorry. I’ve messed up.”

Aunt Reine lifts my head with her hand. “No, we failed you, and I’m sorry. But never again, Serei.”

Twenty-Nine



HOME.

I should have realised it would be this city, because it's always the people here. It was Nako and Reine. I should have never left them, and I hope I don't die before I can show them how much they mean to me. Draycian's scent surrounds me in his room, in front of a dressing table that has been brought in here recently by the looks of it. Apparently, a dragon-king-sized temper tantrum burnt my room to smithereens, and the only part of that which made me mad was losing the paintings in there. My weapons survived, thankfully.

But most of them were paintings of Arawn, and I'm happy they are gone. Draycian's room looks just like it does in our dreams, down to the thick bedsheets and black rug and old wallpaper. There isn't anything personal in here, and for a dragon as old as he is, I'm surprised.

Reine's eyes meet mine over my shoulder as she finishes braiding my hair. "You're the daughter I never had. Do you know that?"

Tears fill my eyes. "I love my mama, but I love you just as much. I'm lucky to have such amazing females as role models."

She rests her head against mine for a second before stepping back, and I smooth my hands over my clothes in the chair I'm sitting on. Dressing in my regular clothes, a skintight silver dress with tight black leather leggings, makes me feel a

bit normal, but as my eyes catch on the black mark on my arm, I remember nothing is normal anymore.

“Talking of your mother, she is furious that King Draycian won’t let her in,” she tells me, and I can just imagine.

“I’m kinda glad he hasn’t. She would take one look at me and never let Dray near me,” I tell her. “And start a war we don’t need right now when Dray is the only one who can help me at the moment.”

“Dray?” she repeats, a hint of amusement in her voice. “If you have a nickname for him, he can’t be all that bad then?”

I pick at the high collar of my silver dress and shake my head. “He’s an asshole. That’s it.”

She makes a noise that suggests she doesn’t believe me, and truthfully, I don’t even believe myself at this point.

A wave of dizziness threatens to make me pass out, and I clench my hands on my forehead for a second, my head bent. I feel so weak, but I won’t give up, even if my body seems to want to do just that. I release my clammy hands and lower them, taking in a deep breath.

“Are you okay?”

I turn to Reine, who has paused in packing me a bag to take on the trip, and I nod once. “As best as I’m going to get.”

“I always knew you’d be a special child,” she tells me as she keeps packing. “Not because of who you are to the king, but I saw something in your eyes when you were only three years old. Defiance and power. You’ve always been a special child, protected since you were born by so many who love you. You do not give up.”

She comes over to me and kneels in front of my chair, picking up my hands. “There is a saying in my old pack, which it is time you knew. These words have helped so many, including your mother, keep fighting when it feels hopeless. We endure the fall and rise in the ashes.”

“We endure the fall and rise in the ashes,” I whisper, and strangely, I can almost feel the power within the words,

echoed within my blood on a deeper level than I can ever understand.

Reine searches my eyes before nodding and rising. “I won’t be the only one to bow to you, and never forget your power, Serei.”

“I doubt the dragon king will ever bow to me,” I reply.

She smiles. “If a king doesn’t bow for his queen, then he is no king at all.”

“I will come back home,” I tell her. “I’m going to fight Arawn and get this mark removed.”

She doesn’t look back at me, like she can’t manage to even face the option that I won’t come back.

“So, tell me about the witch lord and Nakoa,” she questions after the bag is packed, and I choke on thin air for a moment. “Ah, that is answer enough.”

“There—”

“I’m not even going to touch on the rising tension between you and the king. You two will set everything on fire before you admit the truth,” she replies. “But Nakoa, I saw how he has longed for you for such a long time.”

“Nakoa has a mate out there, and he’s never going to love me like I love him,” I softly reply. “And I won’t risk losing him as my friend to admit to anything.”

She makes a humming noise, and I keep blurting out everything. “And Tarrent is a cocky witch lord, whatever that means, and he flirts with everyone. I’m sure he could even charm a toad.”

“Witches are dangerous beings, and he is a lord,” she responds. “But maybe it’s time for you to just have a little fun? I enjoyed many males by your age and—”

“Ew,” I reply with a shudder, and she laughs.

“Not everything has to be binding and serious,” she tenderly replies.

“Unless you want to see an outright fight between Tarrent and Dray, who thinks he owns me, I’m going to ignore your advice this time,” I tell her, and she smiles, looking very amused. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes,” she immediately replies. “Given that secrets caused a massive gap between us and nearly got you killed, I will break the magical bond Draycian forced on us so we couldn’t tell you certain things. I might get kicked out of the city, but it’s not right. I will answer anything you ask of me directly—if it is in my power and it’s not something your mother should tell you, as some secrets are hers.”

“Alright, that’s fair,” I reply. “Dray said he was cursed for taking power to beat Arawn, but he didn’t tell me the curse. What is it?”

“He never told me this directly, but the males in this city, well, some of them talk when they have drunk a little too much,” she replies. “I’ve heard from the other shifters that his curse is one of sleep and power. He has to sleep for years to protect the city with his power. The power around the city, the shield, all of it that hides you from those seeking, comes from him. He would be so much more powerful if he lifted the shield, but he will never do that. I believe it’s more complicated than just that, and he has strange magic to make deals, which always fall in his favour. I suspect that has something to do with the curse as well.”

“So he protects his people, and the price of that is that he has to sleep for years and years? So all these years I thought he abandoned me, he was sleeping in the castle above, protecting me?”

“Yes,” she replies. “I don’t know how you break the curse. I don’t know why it was cast and who cast it, but I do know that he pays that price.”

“I got the feeling that the other dragons are cursed too,” I reply.

“Yes,” she softly replies. “Until the king takes a mate with his fires, no one else under his protection can find love, or that

love will die. That's why they don't take lovers and why I suspect Nakoia has never gone near you."

"I thought they were all just waiting for a mate," I say.

"Mates are rare, like finding a needle in a million haystacks," she replies with a wave of her hand. "Some mates are predestined to find each other, but that is the work of the gods. This city's suffering is the work of a curse, and it is cruel. Draycian has even brought females into the city, many times, in hopes of someone finding their mate, which he hoped would be a way around the curse because of the gods."

"Breelyn, was she one of those?" I question. "My mother's omega who lived here for a short time?"

"Yes," she replies. "But the curse is strong, even now."

"Thank you for telling me," I reply, thinking it over. "I have one more question."

I point over to the painting by Dray's bed. "Do you know who that is?"

"I don't know. I presume it's his sister or mother," she suggests, but I know he doesn't have sisters or a mother. He was born of flames, and all his relatives were male.

"Maybe," I say, not wanting to admit how much I really, really don't like that he has a painting of some female in his room. Especially when she is as pretty as that. If I'm his mate, then who is she?

Two heavy knocks bang on the door right before Dray walks in. By the fires, he looks incredible. A thick black leather shirt is tucked into tight dark trousers, with gold lines down his arms and legs, and all of it fits him well. So, so well. I gulp as I take him in and feel my heart racing when his gold eyes flicker down to me.

And stay on me. "We're leaving now."

"Remember the words," Aunt Reine whispers to me before she walks out.

Dray grabs the rucksack off the bed and straps it on. "You never carry weapons. Why?" I ask.

“I can make weapons from my fire if I wish,” he replies. “Therefore, a blade is pointless to carry around.”

After he secures the bag, he picks me up, his hand so close to my ass. “You don’t have to carry me.”

“I don’t wish to see you in pain,” he replies. “Even if you’re a stubborn queen.”

“I’m not your queen, Dray,” I reply with a sigh.

“You are my only queen,” he says, looking down at me. “Even if you reject me, even if you run, even if you never want me...you are my queen.”

My heart pounds in my chest as I look up at him, and my gaze flickers to his lips for just a second.

Something shifts in Dray’s expression, and he turns his face away from me. He starts walking us out of the room, and I touch his shoulder. “Who is the painting of?”

He decides not to answer me, and I huff.

“Ask something else,” he suggests, and there is enough strangeness between us that I find a need to find something to ask. We walk through a massive room with a raised platform at the top and five spheres full of blue flames hanging in a star shape near the ceiling.

“Alright. Was this your goddess’s home?”

“Yes,” he responds. “She created it in her love of her dragons, and each room you’ll find is gold, red or silver in tones.”

“Did she like jasmine plants?” I ask next as we go through large doors and down a steep staircase that glitters silver and gold, looking like it was painted and swirled around before it set, but it is solid metal.

“Did you love her?” I softly ask. “Is she the female in the painting that you won’t speak about?”

“No, I did not love her like that. I loved her like family and like a mother. But it was not love in the way that you’re

suggesting,” he explains. “Many of my brothers felt differently about her, like Arawn.”

“I know how easy it is for him to make you feel as if you’re the only person in the world until you’re alone and have no one to turn to,” I reply, looking down.

“And you are here, fighting. He has not won.”

I look up at my dragon king and smile. Maybe for the first time, I actually agree with him.

Nakoa and Tarrent are waiting for us outside of the castle, on the balcony above the doors to my old home beneath. Nakoa has a long, heavy-looking bag on his back and several weapons strapped to his body. Tarrent has new black dragon leathers on, his swords on his back, and he slowly runs his eyes over me.

I swear there is a flash of lust in his eyes.

“How are you?” Nakoa questions, his arms crossed and his light gold wings flickering out at his sides.

“I’m...well, shit. But we are going to fix that,” I say, making him smile slightly.

Nakoa looks up at Dray, the smile slipping with whatever he sees. “Ready to fly when you are, my king.”

“Interesting you’ve learnt to show respect when you feel like it. If it wouldn’t upset Serei, I would have you hanging from the mountain top for two weeks until you couldn’t feel your balls anymore for the disrespect you’ve shown me,” Dray coldly replies.

“I think we should get going. Make the most of the daylight,” I say, wishing they would both stop this. I can’t deal with it right now.

“Keep up,” Draycian tells Nakoa right before spreading his long wings out, shooting into the sky. I duck my head into Dray’s neck to hide from the force of the wind, as my stomach feels like it has a million butterflies in it. The spiralling tower house passes us by, the beautiful crystals so close it feels like I could reach out and touch them. Dray dips in the air, right into

the cave system and out of the tunnel and into the cold air. He swerves right and glides slowly.

“I should have found a way to show you this,” he tells me. “Look down, Serei.”

I frown before looking down, and my eyes widen as I take in the massive pack lands in front of me, stretching for miles, with more houses being built on the outskirts. So many people fill my senses, along with scents I don't know, and I cast my eyes above the houses to see angels with black wings flying around, some looking up at us. Rivers flow through the lands, with houses in circles and forests dotted around them, all full of vibrant colours. My family is right down there. My pack.

“Thank you,” I tell him. “I can't wait to paint this.”

“And you will,” Dray vows, glancing at me. His eyes are like the burning sun. I don't tell him, but I could paint his eyes too, and I feel I'd never be able to capture how gold they truly are. I tuck myself closer to him as he picks up speed, Nakoia carrying Tarrent right behind us. We sweep past a nearby mountain and loop around it before flying across what seems like an endless range of white-capped mountains. It's all so beautiful, and even though I feel exhausted, I keep my eyes open to take it all in, wishing I never have to close my eyes again.

Before nightfall, when the sun starts to set, Dray swoops us down, a little past an abandoned town and straight towards a tall building that looks like a fire destroyed the front of it before the rest collapsed. I suspect the top was all glass once, as we fly down into the building, past several floors and metal stairs that look like they used to move and are frozen in the middle of their cycle. Dray lands smoothly on the bottom level, and I shiver from the cold chill in the air. I think we are underground, and I look around, seeing a sign in a language I can't read. Tarrent and Nakoia land as Dray lets me stand, keeping his arm around my waist, his wing at my side.

“Be on guard,” Dray tells Nakoia, who drops his bag from his back to his feet. Dray chucks my bag into the pile and

looks to Tarrent once Nakoa nods. “Come help build a fire before my queen freezes.”

“Couldn’t have that,” Tarrent says, stretching his arms above his head. The leather tightens against his thick biceps and pulls up at his stomach, revealing a line of black hair drifting into his trousers.

Funny enough, it’s getting warm in here anyway.

Nakoa comes to my side, taking over for Dray, and I lean against him as they walk away. “This is a shopping mall, a small one compared to what humans used to have.”

I glance around at the small shops, all with different signs that I can’t read. “Walk me around?”

He moves first and I keep up with his pace, pushing the pain in my leg to the side. I can handle a little walking. We walk past a shop that just looks like it’s full of old clothes, some hanging on statues of people with no faces and pale skin. Another shop has rows of strange boxes, and Nakoa tries to explain they are movies that humans watch. The next shop piques my interest, and I stop, looking inside at all the sparkling jewellery I can see through the non-broken window. Nakoa lifts his hand up, and several spheres of pure fire spread out of his fingertips, building into spheres the size of my hand, and start to float around the room, lighting up all of the beautiful displays of jewellery that glitters under the fire. Nakoa pushes the broken door open and helps me over the broken glass, which crunches under my boots. The glass cases are smashed in several places, but it doesn’t look like much has been taken. A few rats run across the top of the glass, and I shudder, not wanting to get too close to them. They run from the light, anyway.

“I believe the only piece of jewellery you own was the necklace your mother gave you,” Nakoa murmurs at my side.

I wince. “If she ever knows I lost that diamond necklace in a poker game, she would flip.”

He laughs low and leans close. “Your secret is safe with me. Your skills at poker on the other hand...”

I whack his chest, and he chuckles low, making me smile. I limp away from him to the main cabinet in the middle of the room. On top of the display, on a black and dust-covered stand, is a stunning pink ruby on a silver chain. It reflects the fire around the shop, and it's shaped like a diamond.

Nakoa leans around me and picks up the necklace, holding it up in the middle of us. "We shouldn't take it. It belongs to this place and whoever owns it."

"They are long dead, or they would have come back by now," Nakoa replies, and I glance at the necklace. "I believe this is meant for you, and I'd be honoured if you allowed me to give you it as a gift."

This gift feels different from the paints and rare foods he has brought back to me from trips in the past. I feel like he is waiting for my answer more than he is breathing, and my own body goes still.

"Yes," I whisper, my voice hoarse. "I love it and will always wear it."

His eyes sparkle as his lips tilt up, and he steps closer, pushing our bodies against each other. By the fires. He softly picks up my braid, his fingers skimming my neck and making me shiver before he clips the necklace on. It falls to the middle of my chest, and I place my hand over it. "Thank you, Nakoa."

I expect him to move, not that I want him to, but he stays still. Both of us are so close, and I search his eyes, wishing I could see how he feels. See if I'm imagining everything between us and how it could be more than friends. At the same time, I don't want to risk that friendship and lose him.

"It's beautiful," he breathes out. "Just as you are."

My heart near enough stops, and I'm completely speechless just as he leans down and kisses me. The kiss is all-consuming, and I lean up into him, giving him full control, and he takes it, possessively, demandingly and perfectly. How I always knew kissing him would be like. He groans, his scent swiftly changing along with mine, and his hand wraps around my braid, tugging my head to the side as he deepens the kiss.

A crack of glass makes Nakoa jolt back from me and turn with a low growl at Tarrent standing in the doorway, leaning against the wall, his arms crossed. “Our secret.”

He disappears into the shadows of the room behind him, and I turn to Nakoa, who is tensely staring at the door. “Nakoa, he won’t say anything and—”

“This can’t happen again,” he states, his voice cold and guarded. I stumble on my leg and wince. Nakoa catches me, picking me up in his arms. His eyes fall to me. “For your sake, this can’t happen. You need Dray to save your life, and I can’t save you. Your mate can.”

“And I’m not your mate, so this is nothing to you?” I snap.

“We are cursed, Serei. I cannot love you and you cannot love me, but for what it is worth right now, I’d choose you without a second thought,” he whispers back. “And the king would kill me before we ever got a chance.”

“He wouldn’t dare,” I growl.

He sadly smiles at me. “If I only get one kiss, it is worth it.”

Nakoa carries me back to the others once our scents have calmed down, but by the angry look on Dray’s face, I bet he can tell that something happened. While we were gone, they have built a fire in a metal pit and set up four sleeping bags, mine right next to Dray’s. What a surprise. Nakoa helps me sit down on my sleeping bag, and I tuck myself in, as Tarrent hands out the food Reine cooked. I can barely eat a few bites of the cheese sandwich before putting it down and giving up, my stomach turning.

Dray looks down at me and back to the others. “Sleep. I’ll take the first watch.”

They both waste no time getting into the sleeping bags, and it makes me smile that Tarrent sleeps with one of his swords on top of him, and Nakoa sleeps with a dagger in his hand. Males.

I try to sleep but end up looking at the night sky outside the building and the million stars. “Do you like the stars,

Dray?”

Dray looks over at me, pausing for a long beat. “When I was first created, I stumbled out into the new world and looked up. The stars were the first light to warm me before I learnt my powers and embraced the fire. So yes.”

“I love them too,” I tell him. “One of the reasons I wanted to escape was just to be outside the city and see the stars.”

He doesn’t say anything for a long time, but I feel him looking at me. “The woman in the painting, she was my lover, partner, or whatever you wish to call it.”

Flaring jealousy burns in my chest, and I stay very still as he continues, “I do not wish to lie to you and start out whatever this will be with lies. Sallette was the only female I allowed into my lands, and she lived with me for two hundred years. She was a witch, like your witch lord, but one of the first of her kind.

“How did a witch end up in a city of dragons?”

“She came by chance to my city for refuge, somewhere to hide from a god hunting her. I was reluctant to let her in, but after so many years of being alone, it was a mistake I made. Our relationship was...toxic, but I loved her in my own way.”

“Did the god hunting her find her?” I question.

“No, I killed him before he stood a chance,” he replies. “But it was in those times, Arawn rose from the ashes. He came to the city, and he killed her in front of me. He also murdered five of my guards, close friends of mine.”

“By the fires,” I whisper. Dray keeps looking forward, like he is watching it happen all over again. “I couldn’t save her. He burnt her into nothing but ash in front of me and stepped in it, laughing. He left me in my grief, not before burning half the city.” He pauses, finally looking at me. His eyes are like burning flames, but I don’t flinch away from him. “That’s when I went to those more powerful than even Arawn. I took enough power to do what was needed, but I knew I would be punished, and I was. A curse for me, and a curse for all my people.”

“I’m sorry, Dray,” I tell him, and I truly am. I might be jealous of this woman, but seeing someone he loved die, I couldn’t imagine that pain. It still bothers me that he has a picture of her in his bedroom, where he wakes up to look at her. He looks at her every night before he falls asleep, but he is chasing me as his mate.

“Do you actually want me, or is it just because I’m your mate and the magic says that we should be together? Is that all it is between us? That desire pushed by magic?”

He looks at me, humming over my many questions. An amused smirk tilts up his pretty lips. “I like you jealous.”

“I’m not,” I growl.

I only make him smile further, and he leans close to me, and I pause in shock. His eyes search my own. “For me, it only took one look from you to make me burn. When you stop hating me, I’ll show you what else I can do to make you fonder of me.”

My cheeks burn, every passage of the dirty books I stole from the city library running through my mind, as I know exactly what he is suggesting. I only read them because I overheard so much about sex from the males talking about it, and Reine wouldn’t tell me much more than the basics. The books taught me so much more.

Dray leans back and looks at the stars again. “Get some sleep. We have a long day tomorrow.”

I lie back down, my whole body alight and unable to sleep. After tossing and turning a few times, Dray grumbles and soon his warm body presses against my back, a wing wrapping around me. I hate that, in his arms, I fall asleep almost instantly.

Thirty

ℒ

NIMUE "NIMMY" WINDSHIRE

"ARE YOU LOST?" a male voice questions. "This castle can confuse even me at times."

I spin around to see one of the king's guards. Apollon. He is standing behind me, his arms crossed against his black leathers, and my cheeks blush.

"I'm sorry. Was I not allowed to search around the castle? I got a bit bored in my rooms," I reply.

"No, you're free to look around. May I show you some places that might keep you entertained?" he replies. The offer is innocent, that I can tell, but he is still a male. Every male I've ever known, other than my younger cousin, has tried to hurt me in some way. I look up at the very handsome dragon shifter, looming over me with how tall he is. I'm a bit speechless in his presence and have been since I met him. He is absolutely stunning. His white hair looks so soft, his tanned skin makes me look pale in comparison. He has a slim build, but his shoulders are quite built underneath the black leathers that show all of his body off. He must work out every day. The most workout I get is shifting into my wolf—who is very pissed with me at the moment, considering I've only shifted once since being free.

This male...I could have wanted once. Before I learnt how cruel males can be. This one...his presence makes me feel safe for some insane reason. I've never had a chance to actually look at a male and wonder what it would be like to have them kiss me because I want them to. Even being alone with this

dragon is making my wolf tense up inside me, ready to shift and bite if need be.

Apollon waits patiently for my answer. “I’m quite alright, but thank you for the offer.”

My voice is sharper than I wanted it to be, but I let him search my eyes for a second, like peeping into my soul, and I wonder if he can see how much I fear males. If he can see the years of abuse and how I had everything stripped from me.

I’ve never been free until now, and I don’t know how to accept that I’m safe. “Okay. May I sit?” He waves at the bench near the window.

“I don’t see how I could stop you.”

“You simply have to say no, and I will leave,” he tells me.

I pause at his honest answer, my wolf settling down. “Okay.”

He sits on the bench, spreading out his long arms, and I turn back to continue to look out of the window. It gives me a perfect view over the city, and I can’t stop looking, finding new things everywhere I search. The tall buildings with sparkling crystals on top are my favourite parts, alongside how the light pours in from many tunnels above. It really is beautiful. I even like how they use mirrors to reflect the most light around the city, making it so bright. It’s been crafted to absolute perfection and yet hidden from sight. No one would ever know it’s here, and I like that.

“May I speak plainly to you?” Apollon asks. I glance at him and nod. “I can’t say much about your past as I do not know it all, but I can guess what happened to you—”

“It’s none of your business, and I don’t need you to feel sorry for me,” I growl.

He holds his hands in the air. “I am not offering you pity, Nimmy. I just want you to know there’s someone here who will listen if you want to shout and scream or simply talk. If you want to learn how to fight, if you want anything, come to me and I will help you in any way that I can.”

I look back at the shifter, taking in his beautiful and open hazel eyes. “Why would you do that?”

“Because not all males like to see females suffer. Some of us like to protect and cherish females they know,” he tells me, placing his hands on his knees. “I believe every female should know how to protect themselves, and that includes you.”

I believe him. “Alright. Thank you.”

“It is no problem,” he replies. “I also was told you haven’t eaten much of the food. I wanted to check you are feeling okay and don’t need a healer.”

The food here is amazing, but I struggle with it more than Sophie did. She happily tried all the food they gave us, but I couldn’t eat much at all. I look at the floor. “I’ve been used to stale bread, mould-covered cheeses, and rotten forms of food for years. Your food is vibrant, rich and full of herbs, and honestly, it was very difficult to eat because I’m not used to it.”

“I understand this,” he tenderly replies.

“How could you?” I question, curious for a moment.

“One of my missions for my goddess many years ago went wrong, and I had to stay undercover for a long time in a place that sadly had no food. I was young, not fully grown, and starving did not help my dragon grow.”

“My wolf never really got to fully grow. I hope I can change this and she can catch up,” I softly say.

“It took a few years, but my dragon grew and came back stronger than ever,” he tells me, and I think of my wolf, growing healthy and back to what she should be. We wouldn’t be weak anymore, and no one could hurt us again.

Apollon gets up off the bench and comes to the window, standing nearby but not close enough to touch me. I like that he gives me my space, and I like the normal conversation we are having, more than I ever thought I would.

As he looks over the city, I watch his strange wings, and I run my eyes over them. They’re light gold, almost yellow, but

look so strong. I bet light would shine through them, and it would be so lovely to see. He catches me looking and smiles. “Have you not seen anyone with wings before?”

Sadness and fear trace their way back into my chest, and I place my hand over my heart. “I met and cared for two female angels. They were killed by the humans, and I met a few angel males...”

“All of them bastards,” he grunts. I don’t disagree with him. “My offer still stands. I have great hearing, so you can call for me anywhere in here, and I will come to you.”

“Then—”

I pause as someone’s shout echoes through the castle. “Where is she?”

Apollon moves straight in front of me, ready to protect me instantly as the floor slightly shakes. He slips out a dagger from his waistband and holds it at his side. “Stay close.”

I do as he asks as we move down the corridor, towards the shouting. His footsteps are nearly silent, just like mine. I learnt how to be silent as a kid, but I’ve never heard anyone who can move as silently as I can.

We slip down a few more corridors, hearing more shouting up ahead before coming out near the throne room. I go around Apollon, and he reaches his arm out and then puts his finger to his lips and nods ahead. In front of me is a beautiful woman, and she’s glowing a forest green colour, the floor cracking under her feet. Her blonde hair falls around her waist, and she looks very familiar.

“The wolf queen,” Apollon whispers to me, and I nod. Serei’s mother, of course. She is an alpha female, like her daughter, and my wolf instantly cowers. She looks like an absolute goddess, and she’s shouting at Reine, Serei’s aunt.

“Where is my daughter?” she demands. “I’ve had enough lies and messages. I’ve heard that she’s not well.”

“I’m not even going to ask how you’ve heard that when it’s a secret,” Reine replies. “We’re doing everything we can to save her, and that’s all you need to know.”

“Where is she then?”

“She isn’t in the castle,” Reine replies, and the wolf queen’s face drops, her skin going pale, her eyes furious.

“Why?” she asks coldly.

“It’s a long story, Mai, but she’s hurt, and the only way to deal with it is to take it to someone. King Draycian has taken her to save her,” Reine roughly explains.

“Explain to me why you would trust a king she has already run from and who caused her to get hurt?” she demands.

“She did that to herself, not intentionally, but through magic. She believed that none of us cared for her, and trusted the wrong person, who manipulated her from a young age. He secretly spoke to her, and she never told us. I didn’t suspect anything. This male is a fallen god, and only King Draycian can stop him. Arawn opened a portal, a step between worlds, and took her over to the human lands while he escaped your prisons. Things did not go well for her there, but she found friends, and she fought her way out before the king found her.”

Queen Mai pauses, taking all this in, and she looks like she might be sick. Reine keeps talking. “Where they have to go is dangerous, and they had to go instantly, so they were not here for long, or I would have called for you. I needed to care for her with the time I had.”

“I am her mother, and you should have called for me,” Queen Mai states.

“There was not time,” Reine replies, holding her ground, and the queen seems to back down.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“If there was, I would have begged for it by now,” Reine replies, her eyes filling with tears. “I love her dearly, as much as I love you and my sons.”

“Come back to the pack lands, aunt, if he will allow you,” Queen Mai softly says. “We have not spoken nearly at all in years, and I know it’s because of your guilt and missing your mate. The truth is, we wouldn’t have survived without what

you did, and he would want you to be with your family. I do forgive you, you know that, right?"

Reine looks over and pauses. "We have guests."

Queen Mai turns her gaze our way, and I realise her eyes are the same as Serei's. Maybe Serei's are a little darker, but they look very alike. "Come over."

The command is clear, and I look up at Apollon. "Will you come with me?"

"Yes," he replies, a bit of surprise in his eyes. For some reason, having him close makes it all seem a little less frightening as we walk up to the two powerful females.

Reine introduces me even though we have only met a few times. "This is Nimue Windshire, and she is a friend of your daughter's. I believe she helped her when your daughter was near death, and they are close."

"Then I owe you a great deal," Queen Mai says, smiling warmly at me. "You're a shifter, right? Your scent is a little different from any bloodlines I know."

"Yes," I respond with a smile.

"Before Serei left, she said that Nimmy's family, her aunt and her cousin, came over on a ship from the human lands a few years ago, and she wishes to find them," Reine says, and my cheeks warm.

"Is this true, Nimmy?" Queen Mai questions.

"Y-yes," I stumble out. "I was hoping that maybe we could find them in your pack. If it's not too much to ask."

"For someone who helped save my daughter's life, the princess of our pack, then it is not something that's a problem at all," Queen Mai replies.

"It wasn't just me that saved her, but I looked after her," I blurt out, and she shakes her head.

"Either way, you are a friend of the royal family," she tells me, and I feel a warm sense of belonging in my chest.

I go to thank her when two male wolves walk in, and I move closer to Apollon. By the wolf, they look like gods. Both of them are muscular, imposing and handsome. And alphas.

I lower my head as they come closer, and see Queen Mai turn to them. “Silas, Valentine, she isn’t here. I will explain everything, but we should leave for now.”

“Are you sure?” the one called Valentine questions.

“Yes,” she firmly states and looks at me. “You’re welcome to come with us back to the city to search for your family. It would be a great honour to help you find them. I believe all families should be reunited. You’d live in the castle, have somewhere safe to stay, and food if you like to eat.”

The idea of being in a city with loads of unknown males and females overwhelms me, but not as much as the urge to find my aunt and cousin. I barely even remember what they look like anymore, but their names and scents are forever on my mind. I spent so, so many years just wishing to see them.

Apollon gently touches my shoulder for the first time. A male touches me, and I don’t want to scream and run away. “Would it help if I came with you as a guard? I can appoint someone else to run the castle, and therefore you’d have protection in the strange city.”

He looks at Queen Mai, bowing his head once. “If that is allowed?”

She smiles at us. “We welcome all dragons into our lands.”

“Yes, thank you,” I say to Apollon, and his eyes light up. Queen Mai and the alphas talk quietly with Reine for a bit before we leave, and as we step outside, I glance up at Apollon at my side. “Will you teach me to fight?”

“It would be my honour, Nimmy,” he replies, and I smile, feeling my soul rest for the first time in years.

Thirty-One



I BLINK my eyes open to the sound of howling wind, and I already know that we're flying away before I fully look around. Dray's hard body presses against mine, my head resting on his chest, and I run a hand over my face to wake up. There were no dreams the last few nights, nor any attacks from Arawn, and I'm starting to get suspicious about why he has gone silent. Maybe he is just waiting for me to die, which will be soon at this rate. I never thought about my life ending so early, and now it's one of the first things on my mind as I wake up, feeling my body and soul fading into the mark. Into him. I glance up at the dragon king, holding me so closely as he glides through the surrounding skies. His hair is a little damp, like mine, and gold locks are falling into his forehead that I want to sweep away.

"You're awake," Dray says, his voice like a whisper, hidden by the wind. "We had to move, and you passed out. Do you remember?"

The last thing I remember was us flying out of a hut in a forest that we stayed in last night after two more days of flying. Every part of me aches, and I definitely don't remember passing out. I'm getting worse. I don't even need to look into Dray's eyes to see he is worried about me. His eyes, though, are full of something much deeper than worry. Dread.

"I don't remember," I honestly reply. "Stop looking at me like I'm going to die any second. You're freaking me out."

“Your hair’s turning blacker by the hour, and you are so pale, Serei,” he tightly replies. “I won’t lie to you. We are running out of time.”

“How much longer until we get there?” I question, hating that I’m not strong enough to even argue with him. To tell him he shouldn’t care about me like he does because I’m a walking disaster. I doubt he cares that much, anyway. He just doesn’t want me to die because I’m meant to be his mate and queen. That isn’t love. It isn’t real. It’s a commitment.

“Soon. We’re not stopping now,” he replies, and I lean against his chest as he picks up speed once more, flying like the wind through the air. I look around us, seeing more mountain ranges with deep canyons. These mountains aren’t snowy. Instead, they are almost dusty with orange sand, and the mountains themselves are a deep shade of brown, hinting on red. The sun is high in the sky, shining brightly down on us, and the sunlight makes Dray’s wings almost sparkle like real gold.

Dray dives straight down, turning suddenly into one of the canyons, making a puff of dust float out around us. I peep through the dust, covering my eyes just as he speeds up, straight towards a solid wall. I close my eyes, trusting him not to kill us, and when I open my eyes, we are flying right up the wall and into a hole at the top of a cave that can’t be seen from outside. He banks left, into another hole in the cave and dives us right down a tunnel. The air feels thin, and I suck in a deep breath, the pressure of the fall making my stomach jump around right before Dray spreads his wings out into a glide. We’re flying above a sparkling green lake that stretches for miles in either direction, impossible to see how far, and it’s completely still. A damp mossy scent fills my senses, along with how warm it is in here. The green water is deep and so clear I can see down into its depths, to the many strange creatures swimming around below. I swear a few eyes gleam up at me, along with a flash of sharp teeth. I cling to Dray closer, not wanting to be food for whatever is in this lake.

“See how the lake glows?” he whispers to me, his voice echoing around the cave. “It’s said to glow with the souls

trapped below.”

“Souls?” I repeat. “You mean people are trapped below there?”

“Yes,” he replies. “And fierce creatures I wouldn’t ever wish for you to meet.”

“How old are the creatures?” I ask instead.

“Older than I.”

“So pretty old, then, huh?” I question, and his laugh chases away my nerves for a short time.

Dray flies us right to the edge of the lake, where there is a smooth rock platform, with two green-burning flames in metal stands.

He lets me go, watching me closely while I focus on standing without falling as I wait for Nakoa and Tarrent to land. Nakoa practically drops Tarrent onto the ground nearby, and Tarrent rolls to a stop, smoothly standing up afterwards. Nakoa lands at my side, running his eyes over me and not looking overly happy at what he sees. I must look terrible then.

“Nakoa, Tarrent. You two are to guard this door,” Dray commands them. “Any sign of trouble, you call for me. If you see Arawn, fly the fuck away because he will kill you.”

“He could try,” Tarrent replies. “And the old gods will want something for this. You should let me take her.”

“She is mine,” he replies coolly. “And I will protect her. Guard the entrance.”

“We will,” Nakoa states, cutting in. “Wasting time arguing on this will only hurt Serei more.”

“And I’d like my blonde hair back as soon as possible,” I half-heartedly joke with a nervous smile. I slide out my dagger from Valentine and hold it out to Nakoa. “I don’t need this in there, but it will give you warning. Therefore, you’ll have more time to warn me.”

“You should keep it,” Nakoa says, stepping closer and curling his hand around mine on the dagger.

“Would you refuse a gift from your queen?” Dray’s voice is pure ice, and I swear it’s nothing but jealousy. He doesn’t like that I’m giving another male a gift, and I understand it, but this isn’t the time.

“Never,” Nakoa firmly replies and takes the dagger from me. “Be safe, Serei.”

I nod, pushing down the flashback of our kiss and the burning desire to kiss him right now. Just in case I don’t walk out of this cave.

“Do not follow us,” Dray commands. “She will not let you go, and whatever you do, do not go into the water.”

Tarrent walks up to me and pulls out one of his black swords from his back and offers me it. This close, the blade is even more impressive. The onyx is gleaming, and silver symbols are etched down the edges of the blade. The handle is made of black leather and worn from years of use. “This is an enchanted witch blade. It will protect you if I ask it to. It can cut through anything, as I was told, and I’ve yet to be proven wrong.”

“I don’t—”

“Take it.” He pushes the blade into my hand, his blue eyes on mine. “The swords have never been separated from each other or out of my bloodline before, so don’t lose it.”

“No pressure,” I chuckle. “Thank you.”

Dray’s eyes are on the blade, something crossing his features like the blade is very familiar to him. “Come back to us, princess. I want to see how you can fight when you’re not sick. I believe I might have found a worthy opponent,” Tarrent says.

“It’s a date,” I reply, making his lips tilt up. I clench the sword in my hand and look at Dray, nodding once. “I’m ready.”

He wraps his arm around my waist and clicks his fingers. A spear made of burning red fire light appears in his hand, and he twirls it around a few times before he nods at a massive cave entrance. There’s a thin strip of white around the edge of

the cave, and on it are symbols that I can't read, but I get the sense they are very old. They twist and turn, like a sentence, and so many of them fill every inch of the space. "It's a warning in one of the old languages. Do not pass this way unless you wish for death."

"Sounds promising," I nervously reply. "What is the goddess's name?"

"Adrasteia," he says, and I swear the walls shake around us in response to the name. The walls are smooth rock, but it's bright thanks to the little trickles of green water flowing around down the walls into two small streams on either side of the corridor. The only part that freaks me out is how silent it is. There isn't a creak, a squeak of a mouse, or even a movement in the rocks. It's still, unnaturally so. "She has been bound to this cave for a millennium."

"Why?"

"She was once a beautiful maiden, untouched but with beauty enough to make any male beg for her. For years, she fell in love with a mortal who helped look after the gardens around her home," he begins to explain.

"Love is always the downfall in these kinds of stories," I reply.

"It's usually the beginning and end too," he responds. "One day, he asked her to leave with him, and she did. She gave up her life, her sisters and her titles. They lived a happy life, as it's been told, for many years until one day he brought her here and left her here trapped forever. No one knows why or what she did, only that the man who did this became a king. A very rich king of many lands. He lived a long life, longer than most mortals would."

"Do you think someone paid him to trick Adrasteia?"

"Yes," he replies. "She grew stronger, strong enough to lure people into her cave with her powers and feed off them in a similar way Arawn does. Her magic was always so untouched before she ran away with the mortal. She never even knew what she was before she decided to love him."

“So sad,” I whisper. “He turned her into a monster.”

“Her magic is nearly endless, as much as her life in this tunnel is, and she can never leave,” he explains. “Do not worry, Adrasteia got her revenge. She tricked the king’s only son into coming here, lured by her beauty and charm. She became with child by the king’s son before killing him. The king came soon afterwards to try and save his son, only to find her holding a newborn baby and his son’s body at her feet. It’s said that she kept the king alive here, to watch and suffer for all eternity. Her daughter became queen at the age of eighteen, and I believe her bloodline still comes to visit Adrasteia all these years later.”

“Wow,” I whisper. “That’s...”

“Being immortal gets endless at times, and some go mad,” Dray replies. “I’ve told you this story so you are aware of who we are going to face.”

Crazy goddess. Got it.

The corridor gets darker by the second, and Dray lets me stand on my own, carefully balancing my weight. My leg is burning as he makes a ball of flames in his hand, brushing the corridor with its warm light. “She should have found us by now.”

A kind, free laugh echoes in my ears, and I turn, flinching from the pain in my leg, to search for the voice I heard.

“Dray, did you hear that?” I ask, looking over my shoulder, but I find he is gone, the flames with him. “DRAY? NAKOA? TARRENT?”

No one answers my calls, and the air starts to feel cold, freezing almost. I tighten my grip on the sword, blowing out a breath to calm my nerves.

The laughter rings out again, and this time I hear the noise coming from the wall. The wall slowly runs with green water until it’s a waterfall, and the water pools at my feet. But the water isn’t clear. There’s an image in the ripples of the water. It’s clearly my mother, without her alpha marks, and she’s younger than I’ve seen her. Her blonde hair is long, and she is

thin but absolutely beautiful. She is running through a forest with a tall dark-haired male I don't know. He suddenly shifts into a giant white wolf, pressing against my mum, and his wolf looks exactly like mine. "Your wolf is so handsome. You will make a great alpha one day."

Alpha?

Mum doesn't shift as the wolf howls, and they run off through the woods together. The image blurs, and this time is different. It's at night, stars littering the skies and the trees casting looming shadows everywhere. My mama is naked, curled up in a ball on the floor, dirt and leaves covering her, along with bruises and cuts. She is crying, and each noise cuts through my chest.

"Mama," I whisper, placing my hand in the water, and it glides around my fingers. Her cries echo in my ears, and I know I won't ever forget them.

"Did your mother never tell you of how you were conceived?"

Arawn's icy voice vibrates in the air around me, but I can't move. Can't breathe as I stare at my mama on the forest floor, blood pooling around her.

"No," I whisper.

His warm breath blows on my ear, and I flinch. "Do you need me to say it? What your father did to your mother?"

"It's not real. It's not true," I whisper, tears falling down my cheeks. I spin around, coming face to face with Arawn. "You're playing tricks on me, and I won't ever believe you."

"On my magic, on my soul as a god, I vow this truth to you," he responds with a cruel smile. I barely feel the mark burning onto my hand, the vow he just gave me and linked with his magic.

He isn't lying.

No. No. No. No.

Thirty-Two



“YOU'RE LYING!” I shout, wobbling on my feet. I can't move, my bad leg barely holding me up. Arawn looks less like flame now and more like a real male, about to kill me, from the gleam in his eyes. His eyes haven't changed even a little since we first met. Black flames that flicker in a way that lures you in with their beauty. But now I realise I was being led into a bottomless lake to drown. He is wearing a black shirt with green cuffs and dark trousers. Like Dray, he doesn't hold any weapons, because he doesn't need them. He only needs the fire.

I lift the sword between us, pulling every inch of strength I have into this. I'm not going down easy.

“I am not, little wolf,” he taunts with a smile like a snake. “Why do you think your mother never told you about who your father was? All those times you asked, and she would go pale and not say a word. Secretly, I think you knew something was wrong. Secretly, in all those whispers to me in the flames, I know you have been thinking it.”

My heart hurts in my chest, and I clutch the sword tightly. “Stop it.”

He takes a step closer, letting my sword rest inches away from his face. “Your mother didn't tell you because she didn't want you to grow up thinking that you're a monster just like me. She didn't want you to know the cold, empty truth.”

“I'm not a monster,” I grit my teeth.

“Your father was until your mother’s mates ripped him apart. He was the alpha of the Ravensword Pack,” he says. “His name was Sylvester Ravensword, and you are a monster, just like him. Like the blood in your veins.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s only blood, and I never even knew him. I’m more like my mum, and she loves me,” I counter. “Even if it’s true, it doesn’t change anything.”

My hands shake, giving away that it does mean everything. I feel like my world has been ripped out from underneath me. “You believe she loves you? Truly?”

His laugh is haunting. “Did you know your mother got rid of you? She nearly instantly gave you away when you were born and begged for her memories of you to be taken.”

“No,” I whisper, hot tears falling down my face.

“I imagine she has tried to love you, but you won’t compare to her son she had willingly with her mates,” he coolly replies. “You are the hidden secret, the shame of her past. A stain she gave away willingly when King Draycian took you.”

“You’re lying,” I bite out. “I don’t—”

“You know I’m not lying,” he retorts, and I hate that he is right. “Your father pretended to be your mother’s friend and then raped and destroyed her, left her pregnant with you, and I bet every time she looks at you, she sees him.”

I’m shaking from head to toe as he runs his finger down my sword. It doesn’t cut him at all. “We were both born into the darkness. Both villains in this story, you just haven’t realised it yet.”

“I am not a villain,” I tell him sharply. That, I am sure of.

He continues stroking his finger down the blade all the way to my hand. His touch stings, and I pull my hand away. “I saw you when you stabbed your dagger into that human’s heart. The pleasure on your face. You hated yourself that you enjoyed it, didn’t you?”

“He deserved to die,” I say. “It doesn’t make me a villain. It doesn’t make me as evil as you are.”

He disappears in front of me, and I swiftly turn around to find him behind me. My heart races. *Dray, where are you?*

I don’t risk looking for him or taking my eyes off Arawn for even a second. “Looking for King Draycian?”

I hold my head high, even when my heart feels crushed. “He will be here soon, and he will kill you.”

“I can’t be killed,” he whispers to me, like it’s a funny secret. “Neither can you, as you’re mine.”

“I’m not yours,” I snap.

“Ah, so you’re his? Has he told you what Mnemosyne had him do? What he was born to do?”

I pause, and he sees my answer in my eyes. He smiles widely, showing off his black, sharp teeth. “They called him the torturer of the Vanir, but I always thought he should have just kept the torturer title, considering he butchered anyone Mnemosyne commanded of him.”

Torturer of the Vanir? Of his own people?

“That isn’t the king I know now,” I reply. “If he was that male, he isn’t now.”

“Ah, you are so quick to defend him,” he replies with a cool smile. “I should have known you’d break to the mate bond.”

“You don’t know anything. You don’t love anything,” I snap. “Why do you hate him so much? You killed his lover, you killed his friends. Why?”

“Because he’s declared himself king of a race that is mine. This world is mine, you are mine, and I will take it all back,” he states, but I feel like he isn’t telling me the whole truth.

“I am not yours,” I remind him.

“Oh, but you are,” he replies. “You may have a mate bond to him, but you are predestined to be mine. I saw you when I came out of the flames the very first time, and I asked

Mnemosyne why I had seen this female, a female clearly not from our time. I still searched the world, just in case, while I waited to see Mnemosyne's answer. She looked into my mind, saw you, and blanched away in fear. A goddess feared you."

A shiver rattles down my spine. "She told me that this female would be mine in the future, but I would never be truly yours. She said the woman was pure flames, the flames she has always searched for and prayed to the gods that made her that you would die at birth."

"Sounds like Mnemosyne had a few issues," I taunt, knowing he once was her lover and killed her in a jealous fit. "Just as crazy as you are."

His eyes flash with anger, black flames flickering around his body. "I will be whatever you wish when we are finally connected. Together, we will rule this world."

"I don't fancy it, sorry," I sarcastically reply. "So if you will kindly get the fuck out of my way, I need to find Adrasteia."

He laughs and I freeze. "Adrasteia is busy with Draycian, making sure he cannot leave this cave. You could say she's an old friend of mine. A lover."

"Is there anyone you haven't slept with?" I snap, the last bit of hope I had drifting away. Without Adrasteia's help, I can't break the bond.

"You will feel different soon, my little wolf," he smoothly replies, taking a step closer. I lift the sword higher, panic racing through my heart, and suddenly my hand blazes with fire. I feel Dray in my soul, connected to me, and like a wall comes down in my mind, I hear him. "Fight. I'm coming for you. Fight him!"

The sword suddenly lights up with orange fire, burning bright like a star, and for a second, Arawn looks nervous. I lift my sword, crashing it down towards him, but he moves so fast, jumping right in front of me and grabbing my wrist. My wrist snaps and I scream, the room going blurry as the sword falls from my hand. Before I can blink, he grabs my arm with

the mark on it, and the second his fingers touch the mark, my knees go out from under me. Pain like I've never known it cracks down my spine and spreads across my body. Black flames swirl around Arawn and me as I scream.

Red, beautiful fire pours out of my chest and right into Arawn, whose face brightens in pleasure, taking every bit of my soul. Arawn looks down at me, his eyes glowing like dark stars. "When this is done, we shall rule the world."

Black dots swim in my vision, and I feel like I'm floating, the pain drifting away, and all I can feel is Dray. I struggle to keep my eyes open, just as Dray smacks into Arawn, who is torn from me, and I fall to the ground. Blurrily, I watch the corridor burst into angry red flames as Dray punches Arawn in the face before grabbing his neck and smacking him into the wall.

"You should have never touched her, Arawn," Draycian growls. He doesn't look like he usually does. His skin is covered in gold scales, and silver horns curl out of his head. His wings are more scales than anything else, and fire licks up the back of them.

Arawn stands up, tilting his head to the side. "Is it familiar, losing one you love twice to the same male?"

Draycian growls and reaches for Arawn, who disappears in flames.

He reappears at the end of the corridor and winks. "You have seconds with her before she is mine, and she will come to me." He looks at me. "See you soon, my queen."

He disappears into black flames, and Dray frantically runs to me, collapsing to his knees at my side. He picks me up in his arms, cradling me against his chest and placing his hand on my chest.

Everything is fading so quickly that I can feel my heart slowing. I'm going to die. "I d-don't hate you."

His eyes find mine, softer than I've ever seen. "No, you won't. I can't see you die, because I don't hate you either."

"Dray," I whisper softly, my heart barely moving anymore.

He leans down, his lips inches from mine. “Forgive me for this.”

His warm lips press into mine softly, and then they burn. He breathes pure fire down my throat and into my soul, and I know I will never be the same again.

Thirty-Three



A STILL DARK puddle of water spreads out around the endlessly dark place. Something feels wrong, so utterly wrong, and I struggle to even remember what happened. It all hits me fast, sucking the air out of my lungs. My father, Arawn, Dray...and the kiss of fire. I don't know what he did, but I could see the regret and desperation in his eyes before it all went black. My hands clutch a black dress I'm wearing as I stand in the empty space and wonder if I died. Is this what death is?

I touch the puddle with my hand, but it feels nothing but cold and not wet at all. I rise up and look around, wondering if I need to walk somewhere.

If there is a chance this isn't my death.

"Hello?" I call out, my voice echoing on and on until it's swallowed by the distance. I wrap my arms around myself. If this is my death, then there is nothing I can do but embrace it.

"This is not your death, Serendipity Fall, daughter of Mairin Fall and princess of the wolves," a looming, deep voice states. I look to my right to see three gigantic white wolves padding through the water, which parts for them, and when their gazes hit me, I feel it. I buckle to my knees from their power, not even able to lift my head to face them. What the hell are they?

"We are the Wolven gods, and you are of the blood of our chosen," a deep, colder voice answers my thought.

The power from their voices seems to shatter the air around me, and my hands shake as I watch them stop near, all in a line. The Wolven gods. I've heard of them, whispers really from conversations I've overheard from the shifters and even Dray. I assumed they were other gods like Hades and Persephone, who my mum told me about. No one's ever told me what they are, but I know outright I should fear them. A deep, instinctual fear overtakes me and makes me want to bow forever.

"Why am I here?" I question out loud, my voice so quiet compared to theirs.

"We want you to kill Draycian of the house of Mnemosyne."

The demand hangs in the air between us, and I finally manage to lift my head, to meet the wolves' eyes. The one in the middle, his eyes are like silver stars and outright terrifying. It was he who made that command, and the way he looks at me, I'm nothing but a slave to follow his order.

"I can never do that," I reply, giving them my answer. *I don't hate you.* His words repeat over in my mind, again and again. He saved my life, fought for me, would have given up anything to save me, and I can't kill him. "He is my intended mate. Our lives are linked, and you are demanding I cut off a part of my own soul."

"Those feelings will pass," the wolf on the left responds, his voice bored. "Deep down, you know he is a monster, and he will never stop being one. He took you from your family, your throne and forced himself into your life. I'm sure that you'll find a way to hate him just as much as you did."

"You're asking the wrong person," I coldly reply, forcing myself to stand. "Kill me if you must, but I will not agree to this."

"Do you not wish to know what you will lose if you refuse us?"

My mouth goes dry, and my heart pounds. "What will I lose?"

“Your family,” the middle wolf states. “We will burn the pack lands down, hunt every shifter and angel until shifters are nothing more than an old story the humans will tell. The blood will be on your hands.”

If I thought my heart couldn't be more broken, I was wrong. It splinters into a million pieces, and I can't move as tears fall down my cheeks.

“Why do you want him killed?”

The one on the right, who has not spoken, takes one step forward. His voice is softer than the others, but no less powerful. “He came here, and he stole our power. He stole power that he should never have had, should never be given. Our power is not to walk this earth.”

“But he took what was not his to save his people, to save the world from Arawn. He is cursed, isn't that enough? His people are cursed,” I plead, and something becomes clear. “You were the ones to cast the curse.”

“Yes,” the kinder Wolven god replies. “A punishment, but now, before it's too late, we must have our power back.”

The other two wolves growl at him, and he takes a step back, his eyes on mine, and it's almost like he is trying to tell me something.

The middle one speaks. “We do not care about the lives of mortals or shifters or anything else. We live in-between, and we exist outside time. You will do as we ask.”

I look at the puddle of water below me, seeing my own reflection. My hair is nearly all black now, save a few gold strands that shine through, but there are marks on my arms and shoulders and chest that I can see around the dress. I don't even look like myself anymore. What did Dray do?

“You have fourteen days to end his life,” the middle one demands. “We will be watching you, Serendipity Fall, and our wrath will be mighty if you disobey us.”

Two of them disappear, the one on the right staying a little longer. His eyes stare into mine, and before he fades, I hear his voice in my mind. “Trust the witch lord with your truth.”

* * *

Warm, thick sheets are pressed around me, and I curl my toes in the sheets, opening my eyes and looking up at the mosaic ceiling. Gold, black and fire-red pieces of glass make up the entire ceiling and look like beautiful patterns. I'm back in Dray's bedroom, and that means he brought me back to the city. His scent calms me, only for a second before everything, including the dream, comes back to me.

It wasn't just a dream.

"We have a lot to discuss," Dray's deep voice nearly makes me jump. I turn on the bed, my black hair pooling around my shoulders as I face him. He is leaning against the window, looking out at the city, and his expression is clouded.

"We do," I agree. I need to find a way to tell him about the Wolven gods and what they asked me to do, but the warning they are watching presses on me. I can't kill him, and I can't face losing my family.

I don't know what to do. I push the thoughts to the back of mind, letting dark thoughts take over and sweep in. My father...

"What did Arawn say to you before I got there?"

I look at him, meeting his solid gold eyes. "Too many things."

If he reads the pain in my eyes, he doesn't say anything, but a tic in his jaw appears. I look down at my hands, frowning as I see twisted swirling marks peering from my middle finger all the way up my arm, and I glance at my chest underneath a white robe I'm in, finding the marks there too. They weren't just in the dream. I don't feel weak anymore, and my leg doesn't hurt at all. I search for my wolf, breathing a sigh of relief when I find her tucked into my mind, desperate for me to shift.

Soon, my friend.

"What in the fires are these marks?" I question.

“You were dying, Arawn nearly took everything from you, and a second later your heart would have stopped,” Dray states, his voice so guarded it makes me cross my arms. “To save you, I had to give you my fires. The fire deep in my soul, one of immortality and bonding. I can only give it once, and only to my mate. I feared even that wouldn’t work—until those marks appeared and your heart pounded in your chest once more.”

“The fires...” I say, frowning. “What does that mean?”

“We will have forever together, my mate,” he replies. “You are my mate now.”

The words take more than a second to dig in, as I’m just in sheer disbelief. “You made me your mate?”

“Yes,” he replies. “We will discuss this more when you are more rested. You have been sleeping for three weeks.”

I grit my teeth and look away, needing time to process all of this. It’s too much. I clear my throat. “Where are Nakoa and Tarrent? Are they okay?”

His growl surprises me. “Tarrent is fine, and Nakoa is in my prisons for kissing you. Do not ask me to get him out.”

“What?” I demand, anger building in my chest. “You will let him out right now.”

“No,” he replies, his voice like venom as he storms to the door. He looks back at me, and a slow smile raises his lips up. “Don’t burn my bedsheets.”

I frown, wondering what he is talking about, but when I look down, my skin is swarming with fire. It swirls right under my skin, bright orange and red flames, but it slowly fades as I calm down. I focus on breathing normally for a second as I climb off the bed, my warm feet hitting the cold wooden floor.

I go to the mirror, looking at the marks on my body and pulling the rope over my head so I can fully look at myself. The swirls go down my chest, around my breasts, all the way to my stomach where a flame is around my belly button. The flame is really quite beautiful, so detailed, and I swear the black marks look red for a moment.

I lift my wrist, the Wolven mark still there, and I know Arawn isn't going to just leave us alone. Between the Wolven gods and Arawn, I'm not sure who I should fear the most. Likely all of them.

Trust the witch lord with your truth.

The Wolven god's last words flash in my mind, along with Nakoa in the prisons. I need Tarrent's help, and he could get Nakoa out too. I find my clothes in a bag by the wardrobe and start pulling on my black leggings and leather top, bunching my soft black hair into a ponytail. The dark colour is not something I like.

Two guards wait outside my room when I open the door. "Our queen, you—"

"Don't try to stop me," I growl back at him. He pauses, looking at the other guard, and they both gulp. I don't wait for their decision as I make my way down the corridor and to the throne room, knowing the stairs are on the other side.

I pause, going still when I see Dray holding a female tightly, her arms around his neck and his around her back. Her long black hair flows down her back, and she is thin but curvy in a way I've always wanted to be. She scents like Tarrent and Devika, confusing me. Is she a witch? If so, what is she doing here?

Dray turns to me, letting the female go, and when she faces me, it's like the world drops out from underneath my feet.

Salette. His not so dead after all lover.

Description

**Two gods, one stubborn mate, a shadow friend, and a war
I can't stop.**

Choosing love seems impossible.

Especially when I'm not the only one who wants my dragon
king...

My name is Serendipity Fall, and I've unleashed a fallen god
who will stop at nothing to destroy everything I love.

The Wolven gods want me to kill my mate...and I can't. Not
now, not ever. With the mysterious witch lord's help, I have to
find a way to escape them and save Nakoa from my mate.

*Once, a long time ago, a goddess spoke of a prophecy before
she was killed...and it's going to destroy us all.*

Prologue

L

ARAWN THE FALLEN GOD

“MY LITTLE WITCH, singing in her cage.”

Arawn’s voice echoes throughout the wooden cabin, and my hands freeze on the harp in front of me, my song ending as swiftly as the wind in a storm.

My heart pounds, not in fear of or attraction to him, but with the fact he is here. I turn and look up at Arawn, stood in the middle of my home. My black hair falls around my white dress, and I push it aside, running my black nails across my thigh.

Arawn has his magic back, in full, and his body to go with it. I wonder what poor victim paid the price for this. A smile curls my lips upwards as I run my eyes over his black leathers and red cloak with silver dragon clips on his shoulders. This is the male I remember from so many years ago, with wickedly dark eyes and pretty promises from sinful lips. I rise up off my chair and let my magic flow through my fingertips from the surrounding air, the ground below my feet, the flames from the fire and the water running in a stream behind the cabin. I sigh at the feeling of my magic coming back to me after so many years. It’s better than anything in the world.

“Why have you given me my magic back, Arawn?” I question, holding a hand out in front of me and letting the elements roll around my outstretched fingers. “You told me using my power would risk Draycian finding me.”

Arawn’s eyes narrow and he takes three steps until he is right in front of me, tilting my head back with a single finger.

His touch is ice cold. “Salette, even after all these years, you are so beautiful when you use magic. I missed seeing the elements in your eyes. I did wonder how Draycian never sensed you in the prison with me. Just a room away. Both of us locked together.”

His eyes are beautiful too, black everlasting flames. I lean in to kiss him, like he’s always enjoyed when he comes to see me in the fire where he makes himself real but he pulls back, and I narrow my eyes.

“Why not?”

“It is time for you to go back to King Draycian and play his perfect little witch until I call,” he demands.

Freedom? After all this time?

Even if it means going back to Draycian and pretending to be his. To still be in love with him. I will always have feelings for Draycian, but I was never in love with him.

“Do you wish for me to kill him?” I question. “Or simply steal his magic.”

“Focus on the magic and kill him if you must,” he replies. “But do not touch his mate. She belongs to me.”

Draycian has a mate? How happy he must be...

“What is she to you?” I ask, hearing an unusual amount of affection in his tone for this female.

“What she is to the world is more important. She is the key to the power of the Wolven gods,” he smoothly responds, spreading his hand over my jaw. “She will rule us all when the embers fall.”

I remember the goddess’s last words, just like they were yesterday. I was there when Arawn killed her, not in a jealous rage but because she wouldn’t tell him something. What, I don’t know, but I suspect Draycian’s mate has everything to do with it.

“True power?” I whisper what the goddess promised on her deathbed.

“Yes,” he purrs. “Soon, nobody will be able to stop me in this world. Everything is working towards my plan. I had such time to plan, locked away for so long.”

“We shall rule together, like you promised me,” I say with a smile. He and I have talked about this many times, even when he woke me up from my deep, never-aging sleep after he finally escaped his prison. We were both locked away, though my sleep was by choice as I waited for him. We have been kept from the world, and now we are back. Nothing is going to stop us. I place my hand on his shoulder, running my palm down his chest and to his trousers and below. He grunts as I stroke him, and he softly runs his hand through my hair.

“Of course, Sallette,” he groans through his teeth. I remember the first time he touched me like this, thousands of years ago. I was with him for so many years. He loved me and, in a way, I loved him for saving me from a life with Draycian. We were never good for each other, and we both knew it, but Draycian was power, and I didn’t want to let that go. Arawn is different. I love him. I soon realised that Draycian was never going to make me his queen or anything more than a lover. He was waiting for his mate, and he would wait for her forever. I was nothing but a mere distraction he lusted for, never really loved. He used me, and Arawn loved me.

I know he felt guilt over my death, or pretended death at least, and I will use that to get back into his castle and feed off his magic without him ever noticing.

I touch the topaz necklace resting between my breasts, a gift from my ancestors. I can take magic from anyone while I wear it, and Draycian will never see it coming. He doesn’t know the old ways of the witches.

Arawn drifts his hands down my neck to my bare shoulders and down my back to my thighs. He scrunches up my dress, pushing it up and picking me up in his arms, pushing my back against the wall. Right before he pushes into me, he bites down on my neck and growls my name for all the elements to hear.

Our future begins here.

Thirty-Four



“I KNOW WHO YOU ARE.”

My statement makes the room freeze, and I can't move anyway. From shock or something more, I don't know, but my legs don't feel like they can even hold me up. My heart pounds as I take in the stunning witch from head to toe in Dray's arms. My mate's arms. Draycian is my mate now—the marks all over my skin claim this—but our bond is new and unclaimed.

He saved my life...when he couldn't save hers.

But here she is. Sallette, his dead lover. Dray immediately lets her go, and she turns on her bare feet to look at me. I only know two witches, Tarrent and Devika, and they never came across like she does. I can feel her magic, like vibrations in the air, and it feels wild, old and untamed. She walks over to me and tilts her head to the side, her bright blue eyes sparkling like the sea. Dray follows her over, his skin paler than I've seen him before, and his eyes are wide as he looks at her.

“Then I am at a loss as I do not know who you are?” Sallette questions, her voice like silky ribbons brushing across my skin. I can't think about anything, let alone say another word right now.

Dray's lover is alive. What could that possibly mean for us? I thought when he saved me that we might have been starting something, because I've been lying to myself for a long time about how I feel about him. Maybe fate was right, but what the hell is Sallette doing here, alive, if fate wants us together?

“This is my mate, Queen Serendipity Fall,” Draycian introduces me, and I look up at him, finding his eyes on me, and they soften for a second.

Why does it hurt so much that she is alive?

“A pleasure,” Sallette replies, pulling our attention back to her. Her white dress falls to her knees, and in the middle of her chest is a strange topaz necklace on a gold chain. The topaz is shaped like a flame.

It looks so familiar, but I’m not sure where I’ve seen it before.

“Where have you been all these years? You are meant to be dead,” Draycian questions, crossing his arms, his voice dropping, and pain laces his words, cutting through my own chest. “I saw you die, and I couldn’t save you.”

She walks to him, placing her black-nailed hand on his arm, and he doesn’t push her off.

He doesn’t push her away.

Sickness rises in my throat as my wolf growls low, a little of the noise escaping my throat. Neither of them notices. “He didn’t kill me, my dragon. He sent me through a portal, and he’s kept me locked up all these years, in and out of sleep to preserve me. I’ve always wanted to come back to you and my true home, but I couldn’t escape.”

Dray growls, the sound frightening enough to shake the walls. “He kept you all these years?”

“Yes,” she sweetly replies, her eyes wide. “He was always besotted with me. I think he thought eventually I’d fall in love with him, but I wasn’t going to break that easily. Not when I knew I could come back here to my real home. He appeared two days ago and let me out and didn’t follow me. It took me some time to raise enough power for a portal here, and I’m worn out now.”

“Why would Arawn just let you go?” I question, clenching my fists at even the thought of him. He spent years pretending to be my friend, tricking and using me when I didn’t know any

better. I should have known better, and I hate myself for falling for his pretend love.

“He is a fallen god, time is nothing to him, and he never told me why he let me out,” she replies to my answer, never looking away from Dray. “I’ve missed you. I’ve missed my home.”

The urge to rip her hand off Dray swallows every other thought, and I push it down, telling myself that he is just in shock and not still in love with her.

By the fire, I hope he isn’t.

Everything seems to crumble down inside me, and I can barely feel anything other than an empty sense of numbness that not even my wolf can push through in her anger. Everything is going so wrong, and I’m not sure how to even breathe right now.

Salette lets out a sigh just before she collapses, and Dray barely catches her before her head hits the floor. He effortlessly picks her up in his arms, and something about seeing him holding his ex-lover like that makes acid burn up in my throat.

“Serei—”

“Yes?” I coldly cut him off, and his eyes swiftly turn to surprise.

“You’re jealous,” he points out.

“You’re the one that mated us.” I pause. “In fact, I don’t want to talk about this as you hold her in your arms. I’m sure you’re so happy to have her back.”

“Serei, I am glad she is alive, but we will talk about this,” he firmly states, his eyes blazing gold.

I can barely hold back the tears threatening to fall from my eyes. I clamp my hands down on my thighs, my fingertips brushing my dagger, and the connection to my family from that grounds me. “You should be resting, sweetheart.”

“I’m fine. Don’t you have someone else to look after?”

I regret my bitter reply almost instantly. Dray has looked after me, saved my life, and cared for me more times than I can count.

He looks between Sallette and me. “I need to find her a room to rest in and call a healer. I will find you after.”

I glance at them both and notice how much of a perfect couple they look like. I will never be her. “Why don’t you put her in your room, you know, with a framed portrait of her in front of your bed?” I suggest and walk away.

“Serei!” Dray growls, but he doesn’t come after me, and I’m glad he doesn’t. I need some fresh air and to sort out my own thoughts that have been derailed by Sallette turning up. I stop outside the throne room, resting my head against the wall by the door and taking several deep breaths.

“I know you’re there. Wolf senses and all,” I mutter, lifting my head and looking into the deep, dark shadows.

Devika walks out, dressed in dragon leathers and a sweeping black cloak. The dragon leather suits her far more than it ever did me. “Your awareness has gotten better.”

I chuckle. “Some things I didn’t see coming.”

She leans against the wall next to me. “So that’s his ex-lover?”

“Yep,” I sarcastically answer, wishing it weren’t true. “Back from the dead just in the nick of time. Just as I start to wonder if a fated mate is something I actually want. If he is—” I stop and shake my head. “It’s just shit. All of it.”

Devika places her hand on my arm. “Arawn let her go for one reason: to stop you and Draycian. I’m not a big fan of the dragon king, but fate can never be stopped.”

“She’s a witch, like you,” I say, needing to change the subject from Dray and me.

“I suspect she is an ancestor of mine. Distant relation, perhaps. Her blood scents like mine, which is a problem because there are only two of us left: Tarrent and me. If she’s from my mother’s side, where every female in that family

went crazy, other than me, it's better. If she's my father's side, it makes her a royal, and that is a problem for us," she quietly tells me. "I will need to talk to her and Tarrent at some point."

"I'll ask," I say with a sarcastic smile. "Where are Nimmy and Sophie? What about Leucos? Isn't he meant to be guarding you?"

"Nimmy went to the wolves' pack with Apollon as a guard. Your mother invited her," she tells me. "And Sophie is hiding somewhere. As for Leucos..." She pauses and looks away from me. "He is a good male and gorgeous, but I want fun with someone that isn't there to harass me in the morning. In truth, I don't know if that's even what I can handle at the moment. I miss the person I used to be before the mansion."

"You don't have to be anyone, Devika. Any male interested in you can wait for whenever you want them. I think you're amazing," I gently say, and she nods but clearly doesn't want to talk about it anymore. I'm sure Sophie will relax the longer she has around us and when she feels safe. "And good for Nimmy. Next question, where is your brother? I need to speak to him about something."

Trust the witch lord.

The Wolven god's words echo through my mind, and I know if anyone can help me get out of the demands of the Wolven gods, it's the tricky witch lord. I need to find him and ask for his help, and to just tell someone about all of this. It's too much. I have another favour, one I can only trust him with, and I'm not sure if Tarrent will even help.

Her eyes flash with humour. "He's in one of the bars on the main street, drinking the expensive and old whiskey they serve there."

"Thanks," I tell her. "See you around."

"Later, wolf princess," she calls to my back, making me smile for a second before everything crashes back down on me.

Two guards immediately try to stop me from leaving the castle, and I meet the gaze of one of them, who I don't know.

“I’m in a city full of dragon guards. I’ll be fine, and I’m leaving one way or another.”

They look at each other, and I sigh. “I’m your queen. By the fires, let me out.”

The guards bow their heads and move out of the way, and I hear Devika’s light chuckle to tell me she witnessed all of that. I need to get used to being their queen, seeing as I’m mated to their king.

I catch a look at my reflection in the water fountain outside as I pass it, and I barely recognise myself anymore. My skin has a gold shine to it that makes the black markings peeking out of my top brighter somehow. My hair is as black as the night, and I miss my blonde hair, as I really don’t think black suits me. The part that surprises me is my eyes. They once looked like a light green sea, but now they are dark green flames with a ring of gold on the outside of my iris.

Draycian’s gold.

So much happened recently that I can’t process any of it, not right away. Arawn’s visions of the past flash back into my mind, with what my real father did. He was a monster, an alpha, and he hurt my mother. I was a creation of all that pain, and I can hardly blame her for giving me up when I was a baby. I just wish she told me the truth, all of it, because I think I’m owed that at least. The pure truth, even if it rips my world apart and makes me question who I am.

If my father was a monster, does it make me one too, like Arawn said? Could I be like him one day? If I spiral out of control?

I push all the invasive thoughts to the side and focus on what I need to do today.

Nakoa. He’s stuck in the prisons, and I have absolutely no idea how to get him out, and I know Draycian isn’t going to let him out. Thankfully, I think I know someone who might be able to get him out of the city. I head down the many, many steps towards the main part of the city, and everyone stops when they see me, some shocked still, and I incline my head

their way. Most of them bow, and others incline their heads back at me before going on with their day. I look up at the castle once, knowing Aunt Reine is going to be looking for me soon, and I need to get a move on. I rush, without running and attracting too much attention, to the part of the city where there is a row of popular bars and pubs. The first pub is empty and looks closed, and the second one has a few people but not the witch lord I'm looking for.

The third pub has its door open, and I head inside, the warmth blowing over my skin. Tarrent is leaning against the bar, looking deep in thought, and I take a second to really look at the immortal witch lord. His swords rest against the stool he is sitting on, and his black coat is resting on the bar. He is wearing a deep blue button-up shirt tucked into black trousers, and his dark hair looks like he has run his hand through it a few times. That pull to him only intensifies the longer I stare, and I realise he really is beautiful.

Tarrent turns his head my way, his bright, piercing blue eyes locking onto me, and his lips tug up in a breathtaking smirk. "Hello, princess."

"Hello, witch lord," I reply with my own smile. I walk over and pull myself onto the stool next to him, glancing at the barkeeper.

"Good to see you up and about, Serendipity," Aedh, a bulky dragon shifter and barkeeper, states. He comes over and smiles at me. "Where are your guards?"

"I'm sure if I get in trouble, a dragon shifter as strong as yourself can guard me?" I suggest.

He laughs. "What can I get you, trouble?"

"The wine you sneak me into poker night would be nice," I reply, and he winks at me before going to make me a drink.

"Poker night, do tell me about that?" Tarrent murmurs, his hot breath blowing against my cheek. I turn to him, running my eyes over his shaven face that makes his features look even more defined.

Damn, that jawline.

“It’s a secret that my aunt wouldn’t be happy to know about,” I reply. “Do you like poker?”

“Sometimes,” he responds, taking a long sip of his drink. “I’d enjoy a game with you sometime. Maybe you can teach me.”

“Serendipity might be a pretty lass, but she isn’t the best at poker,” Aedh calls me out, passing me my drink. “But, witch lord, join us anytime.”

He nods to Tarrent as I thank him for the drink, and he goes back to cleaning some glasses at the other side of the bar. I don’t think for a second that he isn’t listening in on our conversation, and I will need to ask Tarrent to come somewhere else for what I need to tell him.

“I haven’t been a witch lord for long, and I’m still not used to that title,” Tarrent admits. “Or the responsibility that comes with it. Do you ever feel like you are being tugged on two different paths?”

I think of Nakoa and Draycian first and then of the city and my mother’s pack lands. “Yes.”

He watches my eyes. “Maybe we can find a middle ground for us both, then.”

I chuckle. “I doubt it will be that simple.” I lower my voice. “We need to talk. Alone.”

He nods, the humour vanishing, and he starts to whisper foreign and enchanting words under his breath. I feel a wash of magic against my skin, and soon the room seems to be frozen around us. Aedh is paused, picking up a glass, and he doesn’t move. I look back at Tarrent, who smirks. “I can stop time for a while, but anything that happens physically in this time turns back to normal. It’s useful for private chats.”

The way he says private sends shivers down my spine.

“I’m trusting you and only you with this.” I pause and look down. “I don’t know why, but I’ve trusted you from the moment we met, and I have a really shitty history of trusting people. Don’t break it, please, because I need a friend right now.”

He picks up my hand off the side and links our fingers. His touch sends heat coursing through my body, and it's unexpected. "You can trust me, Serei."

I search his blue eyes, and even though I'm not sure I'm good at making decisions on who to trust after Arawn, I'm taking this risk. Something about Tarrent feels different.

"Don't hurt me, Tarrent," I whisper.

"Never," he earnestly states. "I'm on your side. What's going on that has you frightened? I can see the fear in your eyes, princess."

I pick up the wineglass and take a sip of the sweet, tangy wine and let it slide down my throat for a little courage before I speak. "The Wolven gods came to me in a dream last night. It was like I was really there but still dreaming, and I can't explain it. I could feel their power, and it was unlike anything I've seen before. They told me that Draycian stole power from them years ago to save his people."

"The fool," Tarrent growls.

I agree after seeing the Wolven gods, but also, I understand why Draycian did it. It was the only way to save his people, and there isn't a line I wouldn't cross to save them all. "They want the power back, and the only way to get the power back is to kill him. They said I have to kill him, and they made it very clear there'd be consequences if I didn't."

"They threatened you?" he angrily demands. "Then they are dead. God or not."

My cheeks burn. "Even as powerful as you are, Tarrent, they are stronger, and I don't want all of us dead."

We both stay silent for a second, and I let him take it all in before I ask for my favour. "I need more than help with the Wolven gods. I need you to get Nakoa out of the prisons and take him far away. To your city, please."

"Do you love him?" he questions, searching my eyes. I look away, my black hair flowing around my shoulders with the strands of gold that Nakoa gave me every year on my birthday. I smile. "Yes. I haven't told him, and I wish I did."

He's my best friend, and I didn't have a clue he had any feelings for me until that kiss. I know if I go anywhere near them, Dray is going to know, and he'll no doubt punish Nakoa for it. I can't let Nakoa spend a lifetime down there while I talk to Dray about not being a possessive asshole."

"He doesn't own you, Serei," Tarrent says, squeezing my still-joined hand. Touching him feels so natural that I forgot I was even holding his hand anymore.

"I know that," I tightly reply.

"Do you?" he counters. "You could have anyone you wanted, and the king couldn't stop you. You choose who has your heart and body, Serei. No one else."

I don't reply to him, unable to, because what he is suggesting is something I want. Nakoa and Dray have my heart, but the pair of them will destroy each other.

"Let's start with the Wolven gods. I know of them, but we call them something else. They're called the Ancient Wolves to witches, and they've been around since the dawn of time. My mother used to sing me a song about the Wolven gods, but I don't remember it all. I just know they are to be feared and they are powerful. If the king really took magic from them and they want him dead, if you don't do it, someone else is going to be tasked with that."

"He can't die. He's my mate," I breathe out. "I can't kill him, not even to save everyone, and I know how selfish that makes me, but I can't. I'd rather die myself."

"How lucky he is to be loved by you," Tarrent whispers. He reaches over and runs his fingertips across my chest, over the top of the markings. I gasp at the contact and how warm he feels. "I can see these new beautiful markings on you, and they make you a fierce queen, Serei."

"Do witches have markings?" I breathlessly question.

"We do, but you'd have to get me a lot more naked to see them," he replies with a teasing arched eyebrow.

"Maybe another day," I chuckle for a second before my smile fades. "What am I going to do, Tarrent?"

“The problem with mates is that they take on each other’s past without even blinking. Their enemies too,” he softly replies.

“It sounds like you’re talking from experience,” I question.

“One day, I’ll tell you about my mate,” he replies with a strange look in his eyes.

“Okay,” I reply, feeling a strange sadness in my chest that he has a mate out there. “Is your mate back at home?”

“No, I’ll tell you about my mate when I finally have a mate, but that has not come to pass yet. Now, the plan is this. You need to ask Draycian about the Wolven gods and find out what you can. I’ll ask my people,” he starts, crossing his arms. “Getting your lover out of the prisons, in a city full of dragon shifters? Tsk, big favour.”

“Please,” I plead.

He meets my gaze. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t do it. I’ll always do anything you ask, princess.”

I go to ask why, but he keeps talking and doesn’t give me a chance. “But I can’t do it with your help. You need to make a big distraction. With all the guards, or most, in the castle.”

An idea comes to me right away. “I’m sure I can figure something out.”

He laughs. “I’m sure you can. Come with me.”

I let him lead me off the seat with our joined hands, and we walk around the bar to the back, through a door into a small, tight corridor that leaves little space. He shuts the door and swiftly pushes me against it. I gasp as his hard body lies perfectly against mine, and my heart pounds as I breathe in his drugging scent. He scents like berries bathed in midnight. “Tarrent, what are you doing?”

“I want a kiss for saving your lover,” he tells me, leaning closer. My eyes flicker to his lips, and a jolt of pleasure builds heat in my lower stomach.

“A kiss is what got him landed in prison, and you have a mate,” I counter. Secretly, I don’t want him to move away

from me. It feels so right, him pressed against me like this, and I don't want him to stop.

“My mate is not mine yet. Kiss me, Serei,” he purrs. “And we have a deal.”

Truthfully, he's not asking for anything I don't already want, and I find myself leaning into him, lifting myself up on my tiptoes and pressing my lips to his. His soft lips come down on me in a fevered, passionate kiss that sets my entire body on fire, and a deep groan echoes from his chest. I gasp as his tongue dives into my mouth, possessing, claiming, dominating me with a single kiss, and I give him everything he wants. He picks me up by my ass, pushing me against the door, and I wrap my legs around him on instinct. I run my hands up his back, and he groans once more against my lips, pushing into me, showing me how much he likes the kiss. I gasp again at the contact, the increasing heat in my stomach building to an impossible amount. It feels better than when I touch myself, and I want so much more when he pulls away from me.

His eyes blaze with desire, and I'm sure I look the same as we both pant. “That felt—”

“Perfect,” he finishes for me. “I collect my next kiss when I've rescued your lover.”

He puts me down and starts to walk away, but I catch his arm. “Thank you, Tarrent. I mean it.”

“For the kiss?” he questions.

“No, for being the one I can turn to when everything feels like it's crushing me,” I truthfully tell him.

He steps closer and presses a soft kiss on my forehead. “Always, princess.”

Thirty-Five



“**DO** I even want to ask where you were and why you smell like witch magic?”

I walk up to Aunt Reine, stopping and for a second wondering if Dray is going to be able to scent what Tarrent and I were doing. I imagine Aunt Reine would have outright asked if I had been doing more with Tarrent than just being near his magic.

I don’t answer her questions. “I came to see my old room.”

She steps over the small distance between us and wraps her arms around me, and I hug her back tightly, relaxing for just a moment in her arms as I breathe in her scent. “I was worried. I didn’t know you had finally woken up. The guards explained everything that had happened. I presume you needed space to think.”

I know she means about Sallette, but with everything happening, Sallette is only one of the many things I need to think about. Nakoa. Tarrent. The Wolven gods. My father and the truth behind where I came from. Sallette is at the bottom of the list, even if she did shock me today and I don’t trust her one bit. Dray told me their relationship was toxic, and that means she can’t be as sweet as she seems to be acting. In my experience, immortals are rarely sweet. Time and experience turn them stubborn or kind. Not naive.

I want to ask Reine about why she didn’t tell me about my father, about the truth, about what happened when I was a

baby. But it's not her fault or for her to explain to me. I know that she couldn't tell me, and it's my mother's truth.

Aunt Reine pulls back, searching my eyes and seeing right through me. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

"Do you like the black hair?" I say, leaning away, and she lets me go. Her eyes flicker with annoyance that I won't open up to her and that I'm clearly changing the subject.

"What do you think about it?"

"It's a reminder about trusting the wrong male," I admit. "And how I'm bound to a fallen god because I'm a foolish girl."

"You are not foolish," Aunt Reine states. "Don't you dare forget who you are because you trusted the wrong person. You are Serendipity Fall, princess of the wolves, queen of the dragons, and born with fire in her veins. No one, not even a fallen god, has the power to make you weak."

"My heart does," I whisper. "I'm so confused, Aunt Reine."

"Ah," she softly says. I know she must have heard about Nakoa in the prisons and why he is there, and no doubt wondering why I've been close to the witch lord once more.

But that's not what she brings up. "I've heard about the ex-lover being back. I wasn't aware the king had a lover who died. The dragons haven't spoken of it."

"There are many things that none of us know about the king. I've learnt he is a better male than he lets himself believe he is," I softly say with a slight smile.

"He is your mate, and if you have feelings for him, you must fight for him too," she suggests.

"I didn't know you liked him at all," I say, a little confused.

She smiles at me. "He was frantic when you were injured. I know that look he had. I felt that way when my mate was dying and I couldn't stop it."

“I’m sorry,” I tell her.

She looks at the door. “It’s time I return to the pack lands soon. It may be empty of my mate, but I have memories there I now wish to revisit.”

“So you’re leaving me?” I selfishly whisper.

She places her hands on my shoulders. “Not until you are ready, and I am aware you are not yet.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

“Would you like some food? I was cooking before you arrived,” she questions.

“Yes, that’d be great,” I reply. She kisses my cheek before leaving me in the corridor, and I look down to where my room is. I head towards my bedroom, running my hands over the old stone walls and touching the jasmine plants climbing them, the scent forever reminding me of home. It doesn’t stop me from feeling sad when I see my room, or what is left of it.

The door is gone, broken into splinters on the black floor, and there is ash everywhere. The beautiful wallpapers are gone, leaving scorched stone in its place, and the jasmine crawling up the walls is in ashes on the floor. I wanted to escape this room so much that I never once thought about what it would be like to never come back to it. I walk over and touch what is left of the wooden frame of my bed and run my fingers up the burnt oak. As I glance over to my crawl space that leads to the kitchen, it feels like a million years ago when I used to crawl through this to talk to Arawn, thinking he was my only friend in this place, but it was never true. None of it. I need Nakoa. I rub my chest and touch the necklace. I’m going to get him out.

I leave my old room and head down to the kitchen, where the fireplace has no flame burning anymore. I wonder if Reine or Dray put it out for all the trouble the flames caused. That I caused.

Reine has a plate full of various meats, bread and cheeses, and I sit down on the stool next to her. We don’t say a word as

I sigh into my food and she eats hers, both of us comfortable to sit and eat together. I missed her.

“Thank you for the food,” I say when I’m finished. I pick up my water and take a long sip.

“Have you asked the king to let Nakoa out yet?” Aunt Reine questions, and I nearly choke on my water.

“Yes, when he first told me, and then it wasn’t the right time. I’m going to ask him when I see him next,” I say.

“Demand, Serei,” Reine gently but firmly suggests. “You are a queen, and Nakoa is your guard. You demand he is let out. Females can be easily overlooked in a mating, but not if you hold your ground.”

“He’s completely lost the plot, Reine. He will never let Nakoa near me,” I say, my shoulders dropping. If he finds out about Tarrent, he is going to lose it too. I’m just not sure I want to give up what Tarrent and I could have...and this is so complicated. I don’t want to lie to Dray, but if he is acting like a possessive, jealous alpha already, then I can’t tell him. I also don’t want to sneak around behind his back.

“Convince him,” Aunt Reine says with a shrug of her shoulder. “Sex is usually a good place to start. Males always think with their cocks.”

I cough on thin air, my cheeks burning, and I’m completely speechless as Reine slides off her seat. “By the way, your mother’s on her way here. If there’s anyone to ask about sharing powerful males, it is her.”

“Thanks for the traumatising advice,” I mutter.

She just laughs, and I can’t help but smile until I think about my mother coming here and how I have to face her and the truth. The food in my stomach feels like coming back up as I climb off my seat and take my empty plate to the sink. I wash it up before I find Reine watching me, like she did often when I was a kid.

“Talk to me,” she gently asks. “You know I’m on your side. No matter what you do.”

“Not today,” I reply, giving her a sad smile. “This talk is for me and my mother, and it’s a long time coming, I bet.”

“Who told you the truth?” she asks, her expression changing into nothing but pity.

It’s hard to even look at.

“Arawn. He showed me the past,” I tell her. “Parts of it.”

“I love you, Serei. We all love you, you remember that?”

I smile at her. “I know. I shouldn’t have ever doubted it. I love you too. I’m going to train and get out of my head for a bit.”

“Want a sparring partner?” she asks. “Or a wolf to run with?”

“Not today.”

She nods and lets me walk away, my heart pounding in my chest as I make my way out of the castle and down through the city towards the training grounds. The familiar sand-covered area is empty, and I breathe out the air I was holding in. Several weapons are lined up, and every memory of training with Nakoia flashes into my mind. The times he pinned me down and I swore I felt him looking at me differently. The times I wished he would just kiss me and he wouldn’t. Couldn’t.

How did I never see that he had feelings for me?

I run my fingers over the top of the three swords left before picking out the one on the left with the bronze handle, balancing it in my hand for a second to feel its weight. I close my eyes for a moment and remember my training steps before I walk back to the middle of the space. Every move that Nakoia has taught me comes naturally as I work through the practised steps. I swing around with my sword repeatedly, matching every step in perfect order to my swings. Suddenly, my sword clashes against something, and I quickly open my eyes at the same time I scent him.

Dray stands a footstep away, shirtless and holding a gold sword pressed against mine. I should focus on how he snuck

up on me or how to push him off or even how to make words leave my mouth, but all I can see is his bare, golden, muscular chest.

By the fires, he is a god.

Flame tattoos wind around his waist and chest, over his rippling muscles and flat stomach. There is a line of hair going into his trousers that fall low on his hips. My cheeks feel like they are on fire as I finally look up and find his amused golden eyes watching me.

“I wanted to be alone,” I finally say, near enough stumbling over my words.

“Unlucky,” he smoothly replies, pushing me away gently with his sword, but hard enough to make me stumble back in the sand.

I narrow my eyes at the alpha asshole. “You need to let Nakoia out. Now.”

“No,” he replies without a care in the world. “He touched what is mine, and he will be punished.”

“Who said I was yours, Dray?” I demand.

He chuckles low, and dammit, the sound makes heat spread throughout me. “You’re mine, Serei. This isn’t up for discussion.”

“How about your ex-lover being back? Is that up for discussion?”

“Yes,” he counters with a tight jaw. “It changes nothing.”

“By the fires, it doesn’t. You love her and—”

“And what?” he asks, stepping closer to me. “Are you finally going to admit that I’m yours as much as you are mine?”

“No,” I bite out. “Not until you let Nakoia out.”

“Then we have a problem, because he isn’t going anywhere,” he growls right back at me, his eyes flickering with golden flames. “You are so stubborn, and it’s fucking disastrous for me because I love it.”

My cheeks burn. “If you’re going to stay, you might as well be my sparring partner. I didn’t come here to talk.”

“Let’s play, sweetheart,” he replies with a playful glint before expertly spinning his sword around in his hand three times.

“Show off,” I tease with a slight tilt of my lips. The teasing costs me a few seconds, and Dray attacks. I barely get a chance to block his sword with my own, and I stumble back a few steps from the blow. We continue like this for what feels like hours, him pushing me back and me learning his moves, his defences, and how swift he is with a sword. For someone who doesn’t fight with a sword, he is impressive. I lose myself in trying and failing to get past his defences, and he lets me just exist with him, knowing I’m safe and that he is challenging me. Dray suddenly feigns left, like he does a lot, but I pick up on the move this time and move to lash out at him, catching his arm with the tip of my sword before sliding to a stop. He laughs low, and I love the sound as he wipes a little blood off his muscular arm.

“You are magnificent, Serei,” he praises me.

My heart pounds, and for a moment, I really smile at him. “I didn’t think you liked to fight with weapons.”

“I’ve spent a hundred years solely training with swords,” he informs me. “Part of my training under the goddess was learning every mortal weapon so we didn’t become dependent on our magic.”

“That must have been a long hundred years,” I respond, watching him for any sign he is going to attack. “What was your favourite weapon?”

“None,” he responds. “Weapons make for an easy death, and if I wish to kill someone, I prefer they suffer with my flames.” A shiver wracks up my spine. “But weapons can be useful to harness magic.”

I tilt my head to the side, wondering what he is talking about, and his sword lights up with red, angry flames.

“You can do this, Serei,” he tells me, running his palm over the fire-covered sword and not flinching at all. “Pull the flames from me. It’s part of our mate bond. We can pull power from each other.”

“How?” I question. I want to learn how to do this.

“You did it before, when you were only a little one. You were in danger, and you could speak to me in my mind,” he tells me, and I pause.

“Really?” I ask.

“Yes, I would not lie to you, Serei. I believed we were past that.” He arches an eyebrow, and I nod. “The bond between us is very strong, even more so now. You could talk in my mind, if you wish. You can also share my power. Search inside yourself and look for that flame. That’s a part of me, within you.”

“It won’t hurt you?” I question, furrowing my brow.

“No. You can never hurt me,” he smoothly replies. “Think of our bond like a pool of fire and both of us are within it. Taking from the pool will never empty it, and we both exist within it eternally.”

I want to ask if the power is really his or is it all from the Wolven gods?

My handsome thief king.

Closing my eyes, I search for that flame that I know is there. It’s been burning way before the mating bond, before he saved my life. It doesn’t take me long to find it, and it feels like it’s right there next to my soul, beating on its own. I pull from the flame and will it into the world, into my hands and up the sword. I feel my hands warming as I open my eyes and see my sword lighting up in front of me, flickering with orange and red flames. The flames swirl around my upper wrists and hands holding onto the blade, and it feels natural.

It feels powerful.

I look up at Dray. “Thank you, Draycian.”

He bows his head, and I smile softly at him. Sometimes it's easy to forget that he's not such an asshole underneath all the muscles, praises and general god-dragon-amazingness. He attacks within seconds, and I barely get time to hold my sword up to stop it, embers sparking off the sword with each smack of our swords. He strikes his sword hard against mine each time, and I push back, pushing more flames into the sword until the flames fall to the ground and burn on their own as we fight. Spinning out of the way, he grins and chases me for a few moments. We simply battle against each other, moving fluidly, almost like a dance that we've known for years. Suddenly he grabs me, twisting me around so my back is pressed against his front, and his sword slips underneath my throat. The flames flicker against my skin, and by the fires, my body reacts in a different way than it should when a blade is held to my throat. I like it. Way too much. I let my sword go, submitting to him as he has won. In so many ways. His hot breath blows into my ear as he leans down, and I gulp, hoping and praying he can't sense how I'm feeling. Being pressed against him like this is torture. Complete and utter torture.

"You're impressive, sweetheart. Not as good as me, though," he murmurs. He pushes the sword slightly harder against my neck. "Aren't you going to beg for me to let you go?"

"Never," I breathlessly respond.

"So stubborn," he whispers to me, his lips touching my ear, and I shiver. "When your scent changes, when you want me, it drives me mad with need. I've never wanted anyone like how I want you."

He leans down and presses a really soft kiss to the arch of my neck, and a moan crawls up my throat that I refuse to let out. "Wanting you has never been our problem, Dray."

I turn my head and look right into his gold eyes, and my breath catches. For a moment, everything disappears except for us. All of it, the hate and anger, the pushing and pulling between us. It is just us, a breath away from tipping over an edge, and there is no one else I would let push me off that edge. "Kiss me."

A possessive groan echoes in the back of his throat in response to my plea. It was a plea. There is no doubt about that. His lips fall on mine with a swift, demanding and exquisite pressure. The first taste of him is like gold. I almost moan as he pulls me tighter against him and deepens the kiss, his tongue matching mine, his body perfect against my own. We were made for each other. His sword falls away so he can grab me harder, and I can feel every inch of his hard body against my back.

“Excuse me, my king and queen,” a male voice interrupts. I open my eyes wide and look over at Morcant, one of the dragon shifters I do know well, thanks to poker night. Morcant is massive. That’s the only way to describe him, and his brother Aedh is too. His beefy shoulders are covered in black markings and red flowers, and his eyes remind me of yellow flowers Nakoa used to bring me back from his travels. Nakoa.

“You’re making me regret promoting you to make up for Apollon’s absence, Morcant,” Dray all but growls.

Morcant bows his bald head and looks up once more as Dray softly puts me down. “The wolf queen is here, and she’s not happy. Not until she sees her daughter.”

My heart pounds with dread as I look up at the castle, and Dray places his hand on my back. “I heard what Arawn told you.”

“You did?”

“I was fighting a pissed-off goddess, but yes,” he replies. “Your answers are up in that castle if you’re ready, and if you’re not, I will take you away until you are.”

“I need to know the truth,” I say, straightening my spine. “But I’d like for you to stay with me, just for a while.”

“I’ll stay with you forever, Serei,” he replies, and my heart pounds for an entirely different reason.

Thirty-Six



THIS IS GOING to be the most awkward talk in history, and my legs feel like they are made of rubber, ready to give in with every step I take towards my home. I almost turn around a few times and might have if not for Dray walking at my side, a constant strength. His large hand rests firmly on my back, and I take all the comfort I can from the simple touch. I'm in love with him. I thought it before we kissed, and I know it now. It's so complicated between us, and I never expected to feel this way about him. It hit me so quickly that all the arguing and hate I felt wasn't hate at all.

But Nakoa...I can't live without him either, and I doubt the kiss between Dray and me did anything other than make him more possessive of me. I wish I could see Nakoa, tell him everything and have his opinion on it, even if he is mad at me. I'd take him being angry, being frustrated...just anything. I just want him. There is no one else I trust in the world like I do him, and he knows all about my rocky relationship with my mama. I always wondered why she felt distant and close all at the same time, why there was so much unsaid between us. The answer wasn't one I imagined, but it makes sense at least.

My hands shake at my side, and I feel Dray look at me as we head up the stone steps, towards the entrance hall that leads to the throne room. The stone walls seem smaller, somehow, and the guards on the door bow low as we pass them. Despite all the fear I have building up in my chest, I'm not sure what I want from my mama. I don't want to know the truth if it is

bad, and have it confirmed by her that Arawn told the truth. Even when I know he did.

A part of me has been in denial, right up to this point. This is my past, and I need to know who I am.

The last steps to the throne room feel like they take days, and I eventually see her. My mama. The wolf queen. When I was six, I thought she was a goddess, come to the world to bless us all with her beauty and kindness. I've looked up to her for so many years, loved her for longer, and even with the truth bearing down on my chest, I'm happy to see her. She is my mother. My family.

My mama and a male that I've not met stand by the raised platform, with two guards a good distance away from them looking nervous. The male towers over my mum, making her look small in comparison, and I wonder if I look like that with Dray or Nakoa or even Tarrent. They are all well over six feet, just like this male. He has dark hair cut short, green eyes that are very dark, and he wears strange dark clothing. The scent of him is nothing short of an alpha wolf, and my wolf senses it, and I feel like bowing my head. He also shares the same scent as my mother, so this must be one of her mates. Valentine, if I had to guess. My mama steps forward on instinct, like she isn't aware she did it, and her eyes take me in. She's wearing a green tunic and dark trousers, showing off all of her wolf marks and many curves. Her dark blonde hair is tied up into a bun above her head, several loose strands falling down. Her green eyes widen, and a smile tilts up her lips when she sees me running her eyes over me to check I'm okay, I bet.

I stop a few feet away, and I look from her to the male. "Valentine?"

"That's right, kid," he responds with a deep voice. "I haven't seen you in years, but it is good to see you."

"It's nice to put a face to the letters you've sent over the years," I say fondly. I never had a father figure around, but I did have their letters, and in every one, they claimed me as their child. I used to think one of them must be my biological

father until Reine told me otherwise. She also said she wished I was.

So do I. My mama's mates are good males, from what I've heard.

"You look so much like your mother," Valentine states, looking between his mate and me.

"I've been told that before," I reply before looking at my mother.

She's got her eyes on Dray's hand on my lower back, and she looks between us. "So, you're mated now? I do hope this is something you wanted, Dip."

That nickname makes my heart warm, as well as her overprotectiveness.

"Yes, it is," I tell her truthfully. I look up at Dray, who I find is a little surprised. "Very much so."

"She's my queen," Dray replies, rubbing my back with his thumb.

"I'd like to be alone with my mum for a while," I tell Dray. "We have to talk."

"I'm aware," he replies and leans down, kissing my cheek. "I'll be close by."

"Thank you," I whisper back. The whispering is pointless with wolf hearing, but it makes me feel a little better. He respectfully inclines his head towards my mother and Valentine, and they return the nod.

"By the way, walk into my castle uninvited next time, and it won't be as well met," Dray warns them, and I roll my eyes.

"Ignore the grumpy dragon. He clearly got out of bed the wrong way this morning," I say and hear Dray's annoyed growl even from a distance away.

Mama warmly smiles at me, and her eyes are brighter than when she first came in here. I clear my throat. "Oh, I'm used to grumpy alpha males. Why don't we go somewhere else?"

“It’s your home, Dip,” Valentine says. “Show us where you’d like to go.”

“I like to be called Serei, by the way,” I say as I walk away, both of them following a little behind me.

“Serei,” Mama repeats. “I like it.”

I turn and smile at her before focusing on where the hell I am leading them when I barely know this castle more than they do. Four corridors later, I eventually find a door perched open, and I glance in to see a small seating area with two leather sofas in front of the fireplace, which is surprisingly lit. The room is small and quiet, and after leading them inside, I shut the doors behind us. They both sit on one of the sofas, and I go sit on the other opposite them. Crossing one leg over my other, I wait for someone to say something.

“What happened to your hair?” Mama questions. “It suits you but—”

“It does not,” I snort. “And it...well, it’s a long story. I should start at the beginning.”

“Alright,” she says, leaning forward and linking her hands together.

“When I was growing up here, I felt...alone and misunderstood. I wanted someone to be my friend, to understand why I didn’t want to be mated to a stranger, a king I’d met only as an infant and couldn’t remember.”

“Oh, Di—Serei,” Mama thickly whispers.

I gulp and wrap my arms around myself. “One night, after an argument with my guard Nako, someone in the flames talked to me. He was just an outline of a wolf with dark eyes, and I trusted him. I didn’t know he was a fallen god at the time and that he’s Dray’s enemy. He betrayed me, marked me and stole my life day by day. I was weak, injured, and near death because of him.”

“He is dead,” Valentine growls, his hands glowing red with a pulsing energy of some kind. Even his scent changes, growing darker and downright frightening.

Mama places her hand on Valentine's and glances at me. "Carry on."

I don't miss the edge to her voice. They just joined the "kill Arawn" club we seem to be growing. "To be in this world, he needed to drain someone of their life, and he tried to kill me to become real. I was dying, and they fought for me. Draycian, Nakoa and Tarrent. They risked so much to save me, and in the end, Dray made me his mate, linking us forever and making sure I could share his life and therefore not die from what Arawn took from me. It's why I have new markings, and I have new powers. It's all a little complicated."

"Is this Arawn dead?" Mama softly asks, her eyes almost glowing green.

"No," I answer truthfully. "But it's something we can deal with. Dray and I. We have help, and no one knows Arawn like Dray does."

"Let us help you. We can help you," Valentine firmly demands, leaning forward. "We will destroy him and make him regret ever even talking to you."

"You have no idea what he's like, Valentine," I tell him, my eyes wide. "No idea. The only one who would stand a chance is Dray, and I can barely stand the thought of him going against Arawn and being hurt. I won't let my family step in and get hurt too."

"Do you think we are nothing more than your family, kid?" Valentine replies with a smirk, crossing his large arms. "We are alphas. We are gods in our own right. There is much you do not know, and it would be wise to seek our help."

"Look, I understand why Dray kept me here all these years. To protect me from his enemies and to protect you. Arawn would burn the pack lands down. He has creatures, terrible monsters, and he is pure evil. He is a fallen god. Stronger than the old gods, stronger than anything the world has seen. He won't stop until he rules this world," I breathe out the truth. "As long as I'm Dray's mate, I'll be hunted, and I want to make sure you are far away from all this. We can handle—"

My mum huffs. “You are young and inexperienced and dealing with gods—”

“No offence, Mama, but I’m stronger than you think,” I interrupt, straightening my back. “Reine told me you dealt with much more than I have at my age. Look, I didn’t want to bring you here to argue about what to do with Arawn, when Dray no doubt has a plan he hasn’t decided to tell me about to protect me.”

“Sounds familiar,” Mama says, side-eyeing Valentine, who looks a little sheepish. “I know you’re in danger, and that’s why I left you here. Even if it killed me to do so and not bring you up myself. I can’t help but be worried now. I won’t lose you.”

My voice comes out in a slow whisper. “Arawn, when I was alone with him, he showed me visions of the past. Your past, Mama.”

She goes ever so still, colour draining from her cheeks. I carry on talking because if I don’t say it now, I won’t ever say it. “He was trying to convince me that I’m a monster just like him. That I was born a monster and that I would always be one because of how I was conceived and who my father was. So he showed me you in the Ravensword Pack.”

Valentine is completely still, a low growl echoing from his throat. Not at me, I know that, but at what the memories must be for them both.

I look down at the brown stone floor. “I’m so sorry. So sorry he did that to you, and I’m so sorry I was created from that. You must hate me.”

Tears fall down my cheeks, my heart feeling like it could break in two in the silence that follows. I was right, she must—I flinch as my mother sits next to me and cups my face with her soft hands. “Look at me,” she commands, and I lift my head. My mother’s wet, bright green eyes stare into mine, and I see nothing but love shining back at me. Unconditional love. Her eyes are just like mine. “What happened to me was awful. Terrible and cruel. I won’t lie to you about that. Your father was a vicious male, and so was your grandfather. That’s how

they were brought up, and females were nothing more than objects they owned and bred. He took what was not his to take, and in that painful, awful time in my life, there was you. You were my Serendipity, my star shining through all the darkness around me.”

A sob echoes in my throat as my heart near enough bursts. “I’d go through it all a million times over to have you again. Do you understand? There is no monster in you. You are a miracle because I love you. You’re brave, beautiful, and kind. Even if you share your father’s blood, it does not make you anything like him.”

“Really?” I whisper. “You don’t see him when you look at me?”

“No,” she breathes out, brushing my tears away. “I see only love and myself. You are all mine, Serendipity. You are my daughter.”

“He told me you abandoned me when I was a baby. That you didn’t want me. Is that true?” I ask next through my sobs. I’m not sure if she can even understand me.

“I gave you away to save you from your father. If he knew about you, he would have killed me and took you. He would have brought you up in a terrible place, and I couldn’t let that happen. You’re a born alpha female, Serei, and we all knew it from one look at you. I gave you to someone I trust, my uncle, not by blood, but he was the only father figure I ever had. He brought you up for the first couple years of your life before bringing you to me, and he would love to meet you soon,” she explains to me. “I bet he won’t believe how amazing you truly are. I can hardly believe it when I look at you. You are more than I ever dreamed you could be, and the gods truly blessed us.”

Any doubts I had about my mama wash away with her words, and instead there is just love. Maybe she is right, that I was her blessing from the darkness and I was born good despite the blood in my veins. I’m not cruel, and I could never hurt anyone for pleasure, so I can’t be like him. Right?

“So you don’t think I’m a monster? That I’m destined to be like him?” I ask her.

She places her hands on my shoulders, tears running down her cheeks. “No. You are amazing. You have been since you were a little girl. Every year, I see it, and I know you’re going to be a fantastic queen.”

“I don’t know about that. I’ve made quite a few mistakes,” I admit. “I’m screwing it all up.”

She softly chuckles. “I have made many mistakes. We all make mistakes, but the fact you care and wish to change is what will make you a good queen.”

I nod, hoping she is right. I want to be a good queen, a good female like her. “My father. How did he die?”

She looks from me to Valentine. Valentine’s hands clench on the sofa. “Your mother’s mates and I ripped him to pieces after taking his pack. He never knew about you, and he didn’t deserve to because of what he did.”

“Good,” I firmly state and look at my mum. “I’d kill him if he was alive.”

She strokes my face. “Taking a life, no matter how ugly their soul is, leaves a mark.”

“I know,” I admit, looking away for a second from her and trying to ignore the sharp inhale of breath. I know she wants to protect me from this world, from it all, but I wasn’t born to have a simple life. I was born as her daughter, a fire queen, and I don’t think I’d want it any other way. “So, my Uncle Jesper, is he a male like my father?”

“No, no,” she says with a relieved sigh. “Your father wasn’t in his life long enough to damage Jesper permanently, and he is a good male. He looks forward to meeting you.”

“I’m going to need to convince Dray to let me stay in the pack lands for weeks to meet everyone at this rate,” I gently tease.

“We wouldn’t argue with that,” Valentine replies. “Although your younger brother might not leave you alone if

you do. He talks of you a lot, and we tell him everything we know.”

“Soon. I look forward to it,” I reply with a smile. A real smile. “I don’t know when it would be safe, not until Arawn is gone, and even then there are other—”

“Other threats?” Mama questions, not missing a beat.

“I’m dealing with it,” I tell her, my first lie to her today. I don’t even know how anyone deals with the Wolven gods, and the only thing I have to hope for is that Tarrent figures out something soon. “Alright,” Mama says, but I can see that she isn’t going to forget I said that. “Mama, I want to ask you something. Erm...alone.”

My cheeks burn a bit as I look at Valentine, and he sighs as he looks between us. “Perhaps I’ll go for a walk and threaten some of the dragons to see if Ragnar is right and they do breathe fire.”

“They do, and if you’re not fireproof like me, I wouldn’t risk it,” I reply. Valentine chuckles low as he comes over and kisses my mum on the top of her head. “I’ll be outside.”

“Oh, Valentine, I forgot to say thank you for the daggers. They saved my life more than once, and I really do love them,” I tell him, patting the one on my thigh. “I don’t usually carry both of them, as I’m a better fighter with one. I almost thought I lost one of them in a fire caused by Dray, but thank the fires they are fireproof.”

“When you come to the pack lands, I will show you around our armoury, and you may have anything you desire,” Valentine says, looking pleased. How I wish he was my father, or one of my mama’s mates was. They are good males.

He walks out and shuts the door behind us, the sound echoing. “What is it, then, that you couldn’t say in front of Valentine?”

I clear my throat once. Twice. “How do you manage more than one mate? How do you even get them to get along without killing each other?”

“Oh,” she replies, looking a little shocked. “Are you mated to more than one male?”

“No,” I quickly say. “I mean, Dray is my fated mate, and I want what we could have, but I love Nakoa. He is my guard, and Dray currently has him locked up for kissing me. So you can see that is going well. I seriously miss him. Then there is the witch lord, Tarrent, who has smashed his way into my thoughts every hour of the day and—”

“I see,” Mama interrupts with a small smile. “Love is never easy, Serei. If they love you, they will never make you choose, because love isn’t making a choice between one or the other. If they love you, they will take you as you truly are. Mates are a blessing to the soul, a reason to fight when there is no hope, and if you are lucky enough to have that connection with more than one person, then you are blessed.”

“I have a feeling they might prefer to rip each other to shreds,” I mutter.

She laughs. “Oh, I doubt it. They know you, Serei, and they would be fools to upset you. I’m glad to know you have people around you, protecting you.”

“This is my home,” I softly say.

“Once, that would have hurt me to hear, but I can see you are home,” she replies with a kind smile. “And all I ever wanted is for you to be happy.”

“I tried to run away from here, but the second I left, I knew this is where I want to be. I was running away from my future out of fear of the unknown. I won’t do that again,” I tell her. “But I want you in my life more than once a year. Dray can adjust his silly rules.”

“As long as you are safe,” she replies. “I will be here as much as you can stand.” I chuckle and pull her into a tight hug, breathing in her scent. “I’m just glad to see you’re okay. And know that you come to me if you need us for anything. I will have an army at my side within seconds, ready for you. You are our princess, no matter what.”

“Thank you, Mama,” I reply, leaning back, and her hands stay on my arms. “We might need an army in the end, depending on what Dray decides to do next.”

“We will have people researching Arawn in our city repeatedly and talking to those in the prisons about him,” she tells me. “The records go back to the old gods, and there might be something that could help you.”

“Thank you,” I say again. “How is my friend? Nimmy?”

“Nimue and her dragon guard have rooms next to each other in our castle. She’s a bit nervous around us, but we’re very close to finding her family and making her as welcome as we can. Apollon does well to calm her nerves around males. We’ve heard that her family did come into the city, and we have people looking, searching everywhere. They may have taken a new name, which is not uncommon, but we’ll find them,” she explains.

“Good. She’s a really good female, and I owe her,” I explain. “Apollon is one of Dray’s personal guards and I dare say a friend. He can be trusted.”

My mum searches my eyes. “I’m glad you have a friend like her.”

“Me too,” I tell her. “Devika and Sophie are also my friends, and I’d like you to meet them one day.”

She nods. “Thank them for me, for saving you.”

“I will,” I reply.

“I don’t want to overstay my welcome,” Mama says with a sigh, “or leave Valentine alone too long with the dragons. He might truly annoy them enough to be set on fire.”

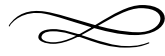
I chuckle and stand with her. She hugs me tightly one more time. “Stay, I can find my own way out. If you need me, my daughter, you know where I am. I will come back soon, anyway.”

“Good, you are always welcome, and if anyone tries to stop you, tell them that they will have to deal with a pissed-off queen if they don’t let you in,” I say, and she grins at me.

“You sound like me,” she whispers. “I love it and you.”

“I love you too, Mama,” I say, her eyes brightening before she bows her head, and I do the same, watching her leave the room and close the door behind her. As I sit on the couch near the fireplace and look at the flames, I can’t stop smiling. I pull at the flames and imagine them spreading around me for a second, wanting to test my power and feeling a pull to the flames that I can’t deny. The red and orange flames pour out of the fire, and they completely engulf me on the chair, and for a moment, it feels relaxing. But within seconds, the flames turn blue and black, swiftly changing from soft to violent, swirling fire. I feel myself falling backwards into nothing but burning darkness before I can scream for help.

Thirty-Seven



THE FIRE ALMOST SEEMS NEVER-ENDING,

and within it, all I feel is safe. It reminds me of Draycian, of Nakoa and Tarrent. I open my eyes within the flames and pause, seeing an outline of a woman within the fire. She is curvy, her arms loose at her sides, but I can't make out much more about her. Words seem foreign as I try to speak, and the woman turns around, facing me. Her eyes are pure black, and as she opens her mouth to speak, I feel myself falling once again. This time, I slam onto a cold, damp surface, and I cough out from the smack. The air is pulled out of my lungs, and I gasp a few seconds, feeling like I could almost heave as I look up at the stone ceiling. A light flickers in and out every few seconds. I dig my nails into the stone floor as embers fall and disappear in front of my eyes, and ash brushes against my knees as I sit up.

“Serei?” Nakoa’s voice fills the room, and I turn, my eyes wide as I find him looking right at me. His familiar brown eyes, eyes that when the sun hits them, it makes them more beautiful than any sunset. Even now, in the dim light, I can’t look away.

If I look away, it might not be real that he is here with me, and I can’t face that. My heart pounds as I beg myself not to wake up. Nakoa. My Nakoa. Chains rattle as he stands up off his knees, his black hair falling around his shoulders with nothing to tie it up. His black shirt is ripped and torn, revealing so much of his tanned skin, which is covered in dirt. Thick

gold chains are wrapped around his wrists and ankles, and sickness rises in my throat. Dray did this to him. For a kiss. The room smells terrible and stale and damp, but I barely notice as I focus on Nakoa and run straight to him. He squeezes me tightly as I crash my body into his, a sob escaping my throat. His breaths are shallow as he clutches me to him like he never wants to let go.

“Am I dreaming, Serei?” he murmurs into my ear, and I shiver.

“No,” I whisper back, leaning away enough to look up at him. Light stubble is growing on his jaw as I trace my fingers over it. “I’m here. I’m really here.”

“How in the fires are you here?” he softly questions, lifting his cuffed hand to run his fingers through my hair. “Are you well? The last time I saw you, you were near death, and the king—”

“I’m fine,” I interrupt. I don’t want to talk about Dray, not with Nakoa. Not right now.

He searches my eyes. “What is wrong? I know you, and something is wrong.”

“Other than my best friend being locked up for kissing me, you mean?” I reply.

Nakoa’s eyes soften for a moment. “I deserve—”

I kiss him before he can say another word, because he deserves the world and not this. Because I’m done chasing and skirting around the fact I’m in love with him, and I don’t know how much time I have left. Any time I have left...I want to spend with him.

He’s my guard. He’s my best friend. And he’s the male who I’m in love with and have been for a long time. He groans and kisses me back, his hands tightening on my waist, and I become hyper focused on every bit of his body touching me.

“Serei,” he whispers against my lips, breaking the kiss. “This really does feel like a dream now more than ever.”

I smile up at him and gently cup his face with my hand. “I’m getting you out of here, and then we can have a million dreams like this.”

Something seems to snap him out of a trance, and he shakes his head, my hand falling away. “This is the punishment I deserve, Serei, and only the king should let me out of it. I swore to the gods to protect you, and I failed in every way that is possible. The worst failure on my part is that I am not sorry for what I did. That I’d gladly do it all over again, a million times over, for the time I got with you.”

“No, it’s not right,” I bite out, seeing red. “You don’t deserve this for growing feelings for me. That’s insane and—”

“Listen to me, Serei,” he interrupts.

“No, you need to listen to me. I get that you made vows, but...loving me should not cost this,” I whisper at the end of the sentence. “Please, I need you to trust me.”

“I trust you, Serei,” he sighs, tugging me against him. “What is your plan? Knowing you, it will get us both in more trouble.”

“But we will be together, and that’s all I care about,” I admit, nibbling on my bottom lip.

“You’ve changed. You seem less frightened, less unsure of yourself,” Nakoia compliments. “I like it.”

“I always thought I was worthless, and Arawn fed into that insecurity, and I let him. I am not worthless, and I have so many people in my life who care. I guess it took me a while to realise it,” I admit, placing my hands on his arms. “Back to my plan, before I burst into flames and disappear. I don’t have a clue how to control the fires.”

“We should call for the king. He could—”

“Be an overbearing asshole. Yes, I know,” I interrupt that crazy idea. “Tarrent is my plan. I trust him, and he’s going to come to get you out.”

Nakoia doesn’t look impressed. “Where will you be?”

“I’m going to make a distraction big enough to fill the castle with dragons and empty the city,” I firmly say. “Not sure how yet, but I’ll figure it out.”

“The witch is sure he can get us both out? You and I?”

“Yes, and himself as well. Dray will see him as an enemy after this.”

“He won’t be impressed with you either, Serei,” Nakoa gently reminds me.

“I don’t care,” I bite out.

“You do care. That’s the problem with all of this. If you didn’t care...it would be easier,” he says with a sigh. “I know you see what he is doing to me as wrong, but I do not. The king is a great male, one I deeply respect, and I deserve this. I deserve worse.”

I shake my head. “You don’t, Nakoa. If you deserve this, then so do I. Should I tell Dray to lock me up next to you?”

“No,” he growls, his eyes flashing with fire, his skin warming under my palms. I lean closer, pressing my chest against his, and he goes still, his scent swiftly changing to match my own. Our desire is like a thick wave of magic in the air, and I can’t focus on anything but his lips. “What are you doing, my troublesome wolf?”

“Causing trouble,” I breathe out. My heart pounds, and I nearly jump out of Nakoa’s arms when I hear a rattle of something nearby. I glance at the door, my eyes catching on the flickering lamp in the corridor before turning back to Nakoa.

His eyes are wide and his lips part. “You need to leave.”

“Maybe I can take you with me, through the flames somehow. I was just looking at the flames and pulling them to me, and I can do that again somehow.”

“My place is here for now, and the chains are immune to fire,” he softly explains. “This time with you is enough to keep me warm for a long time.”

“When you’re free, I don’t want us to ever be apart,” I whisper. “I love you. I never imagined telling you that for the first time when you’re chained in a dungeon, but—”

His lips fiercely take my own, pouring all his passion and love into every stroke of his lips, parting my own and marking me. His fingers find my necklace, and he groans into my kiss. I will never stop wearing it, especially if this is all I can have of him for now. He breaks the kiss first, and seconds later, I hear the distant footsteps and chatter of two males. He lifts the necklace to his lips and kisses it.

“Soon, I want you in nothing but this necklace,” Nakoa demands.

My skin flushes. “Okay.”

He grins at me and kisses my cheek softly. “I feel you are mated and the curse is over but is Tarrent simply a friend?”

I won’t lie to him. “No.”

He kisses my cheek. “Good. I want you protected, and he is a good male. So is the king.”

“You know they want me in the same way you do?” I breathlessly ask. “They want—”

“A forever with you. To be inside you and hear your moans, see your body react to us. They want every kiss, every breathless prayer to the gods when you tip over the edge. I want this too,” he whispers to me. By the fires. I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing my lips to his and wishing he could turn every word into a reality right now. He picks me up, the chains jostling with every movement, but I barely notice the world around us as his tongue finds mine, and he presses into me. Our clothes feel like nothing but a barrier as I tighten my grip on his waist with my legs, and his lips descend down my jawline, slowly, one kiss at a time.

Abruptly my hands start to burn, and it takes me a second to realise that they aren’t just hot, they are on fire. The blue flames spread down my arms in swirls, fiery and furious. I immediately push myself away from Nakoa, and his eyes flash

with the blue fire as it spreads up my arms and down my body until it's almost dancing around me.

“Serei!” Nakoā shouts, but it's too late, and I'm falling once more with nothing but a scream lodged into my throat.

* * *

The flames are the same as last time, spitting and crackling around me. I float within them, like a sea of flames, and I look for the female, finding her a few feet away from me. I open my mouth to speak, only to find I can't. No words come out at all.

“What has been taken must be forsaken.”

I cry out, no sound leaving my lips as the earsplitting voice sings to me. It's a female voice, but it's shrill and high-pitched, and it hurts. I clap my hands over my ears, trying to block her out as she carries on singing. “When the embers fall, a new goddess will rise within. When the goddess is created, long will wait the mated.”

The fires consume me, burning every inch of my skin, and I cry out as I suddenly fall through warm air and crash face-first into sand. I roll on my back, lifting my hands to feel my blood pouring from my ears, covering my palms. I can't hear a thing, and the lack of sound is unnerving. Warm yellow and orange beams of light pour through my fingers as the pain fades, and I sit up as a flicker of sound comes back to me. Who in the fires was that female in the flames? What did her words mean?

Was it about me?

Waves crashing nearby make me jolt, and I tilt my head to see that I'm on a beach. A beautiful, massive beach that stretches far and wide, and I turn as many sounds fill my ears. Behind me is a large city that I've never seen before, with a massive white pyramid in the middle of it. Various homes spread out around it in a circle from what I can see, and there are so many colours spread everywhere. I turn back to the sea, where I can see several wooden ships floating out near the

horizon, and the sun is setting slowly, casting the most beautiful colours across the sky.

“Wow,” I whisper to myself, even as dread crawls into my chest. Portalling into dungeons was one thing, but this looks very far from the city... Arawn.

He could find me, and I have nothing but one dagger to protect me. This city is full of strangers, and so many scents fill my senses. Calm, Serei. Calm. Calm. My breaths come out shallow, and I gasp, unable to focus on anything but the fact I'm alone and have no clue where I am. Arawn can't take me. He would kill me, or worse. My chest starts to feel tight, and everything is becoming blurry. By the fires, I can't have a panic attack here.

The sun kisses against my skin, but even that isn't enough to stop the panic from swarming over every rational thought in my mind, twisting and turning it into nothing but fear. Every second I'm here is a second Arawn can find me.

Dray...he won't know where I am. Neither will Tarrent, Nakoa, Devika, Nimmy, or my family. I glance down the beach to see a roaring fire, with shadows of people dancing around it, and hear loud music playing that I've never heard before. Laughter and shouts of joy echo down to me, but I can't breathe. I can't focus on them.

Around me, the air feels tighter, and I fall to my knees, struggling for air. Two warm hands lift my cheeks, and I breathe in his scent as I look into Tarrent's sea-blue eyes. “Breathe. You're safe and I have you. Focus on me. Only me, princess.”

“Only you,” I whisper back, my words broken and staggered. He breathes with me, and I copy his breaths, knowing he is slowing them for me. For a long time, we simply breathe until it isn't too hard anymore, and I feel myself relaxing. My cheeks feel warm from his touch even as he lowers his hands.

He gives me a devilish smile, and I'm thankful he isn't going to say anything about the state he found me in. I find

myself smiling back. “Playing runaway again, are we, princess?”

I don't even think before I move into him and wrap my arms around his neck, both of us kneeling on the sand. He holds me too, releasing a long breath I didn't know he was holding in.

“Are you okay? I see the blood,” Tarrent questions. His voice is gentle, but there is a note of fury there. Protective fury, I realise.

I look up at him, lowering my hands. He doesn't move his hands from either side of my waist. “It was an accident, the portal anyway. I can't even explain the blood, but it's from my ears.”

“Tell me when you wish,” he simply replies. “But tell me now that you're safe and unhurt so I might be able to breathe correctly.”

I softly smile. “I'm okay. I promise.” He kisses the top of my head. “How did you find me?”

He pauses for a moment as he looks down at me, almost like he doesn't want to explain this to me. I look up at him, and then I can't stop looking. I can't pull my eyes away at all. The sun shines tinted orange, bright yellow, burning reds and pale pinks through his dark hair and across his beautiful golden skin. For a moment, he looks absolutely gorgeous, and it makes me completely pause. I could paint this, when I have time, to remember it. To capture how beautiful he is in this light.

Not that he isn't always like this, but the sun...it marks my witch lord.

He looks down at me like he wants to tell me the biggest secret, and I wonder if this is a secret for the witches. If it is, I don't want him to be forced to tell me anything. We just stare at each other, and I wonder what we look like to other people on this beach. Two odd-scented strangers kneeling in the sand, the sun setting behind us.

“I can pull myself through shadows and light to you. It’s special to my bloodline and a secret. Royal witches can always find certain people,” he explains to me.

“Why me then?”

He arches an eyebrow as his lips tilt up. The smile doesn’t quite meet his eyes, though. “Hasn’t anyone ever told you that you’re special, princess?”

“Considering I’m happy you’re here, I’m letting you deflect on that one,” I mutter.

He chuckles low, and I feel the laugh throughout my entire body. “How did you know I had left the city?”

“I was keeping an eye on you and assumed you’d stay in the dungeons with the guard.”

“Nakoa,” I correct, and he smiles. “Did anyone else notice?”

“Oh, yes.” He grins. “A king might be going crazy as we speak.”

My heart hurts for a moment, but then I remember Nakoa. Dray can suffer for a bit. It’s the least he deserves. I’m sure Sallette will keep him company. The irony is that thinking about her and Dray alone makes me want to go back to the castle immediately.

I’m so done for. That damn dragon king.

I clear my throat, and Tarrent lets me go to help me stand up with him before brushing off the sand from his black trousers. I smile at his attempts, as the sand is everywhere. “You travelled halfway across the world, princess. Impressive.”

“You know where we are?” I ask.

“The Fenrir Court, or the Fenrir Kingdom now. I haven’t been here in a long time, but I keenly remember they serve the best alcohol,” he smoothly says. “Shall we go and test it out?”

“Are you joking?” I question.

“About alcohol?” he asks. “Or about spending time here?”

“Both,” I say, waving my hands in the air. “Arawn will find me here, if he isn’t on his way already and—”

“Arawn cannot track you when I am close,” he confidently states. “After I was near the bastard, I figured out a way to make a spell. I cast it when we got back to the city. He cannot find you when I am close.”

“Oh.” I pause.

Tarrent tilts his head to the side. “This city would welcome you. The ruler is a fair ruler, and he fought in the wars with your mother and the alphas. Many of the angels in this city did, humans too.”

“Really?” I say, looking up at the pyramid. There is so much of my mama’s story I don’t know, and I want to know. I want to learn all of her past, the good and the bad, and one day I hope she will tell it to me.

“Yes. We need to work on those powers of yours, princess, and the world will be yours to travel as you please,” he says, tapping my nose. “Or you could end up getting yourself in trouble. You can’t go jumping around the world until you can focus that power.”

I remember the female in the flames, her voice still echoing in my mind. “I’m not doing this again for a while.”

“You fear your magic?” he asks. “I’m sure it will not portal you into a volcano or the middle of the ocean.”

“I’m fireproof. A volcano might be a nice swimming pool,” I suggest with a smile. He chuckles low before a deep bellowing laugh escapes the back of his throat, and I can’t help but laugh with him. Tarrent Bloodsong can make me forget the world around me and only see him.

A couple, lost in each other, walk past us, and Tarrent watches them go. I sigh. “We should get back.”

“No,” Tarrent replies. “You escaped the city the first time because you’ve not lived, right?”

“Yes.”

“Let me have a few hours to show you how to live,” he asks, holding out his hand. “There’s people down there, dancing and laughing. They’re living, breathing and having fun. Let’s join them.”

I look at his outstretched hand and back up into his eyes. “You’re a bad influence, witch lord.”

“But very tempting, I’m sure,” he purrs. I grin and place my hand in his, and he grins right back at me. We walk down the beach quietly for a second, a slight bit of nerves washing over me at the idea of just relaxing and possibly dancing. I’ve only ever danced with Reine as a little girl, and my mum once when she brought a device that played strange music for me to hear.

I feel Tarrent’s magic wash over me, even before I register the hum of his voice speaking those strange and ancient words. I blink at the thigh-length flowing white dress I’m wearing that loops around my neck and is tight across my chest. My bare feet sink into the soft sand, and I sigh. The blood from my hands is gone, and my skin almost gleams like I’ve just gotten out of the bath, and my wolf howls in happiness within me.

“I want to learn that spell, witch lord,” I say, smiling up at him, and I pause. I wasn’t the only one who changed. Tarrent’s shirt is gone. Gone. I come face to face with golden abs, toned stomach and muscular arms. Words that I can’t read or understand are written across his chest, many, many lines of them all the way down to the panels of his abs. Parts of them swirl off around the side of his ribs, up and over his shoulders and down his thick arms. I look up to find his eyes on me, and he answers my unasked question.

“When anyone takes a lord title or lady of the witches, these ancient words are written on you until a new witch takes over. I didn’t get them right away when my father passed, as I refused to take the magic that pools in the centre of my city. I avoided my responsibilities at first, until I heard my people were suffering, and I knew I had to step in.” He pauses and takes my hand, placing my fingers on the writing over his heart. His skin is so warm, and I flatten my palm against his chest, unable to resist the urge to touch him. “The words speak

of honour and protection for the city, for my people. These are words only royals can ever read or even try to explain.”

The waves are lapping so close, brushing over the sides of my feet, but I barely notice as I trace the words on his chest. His hand covers mine, and he links our fingers. “I like them.”

I’d like to kiss each word, even when I cannot understand them. It might just be Tarrent that I want to kiss, if I’m honest with myself. The draw to him is undeniable at this point. “We are alike. Do you know that?”

I furrow my brow as I look up at him, and he explains.

“We both have so much pressure on our shoulders. We both have enemies that would rejoice in our death, but we fight still—for moments like this,” he tells me. “We carry on fighting for a future full of moments like this.”

“Sometimes I can’t imagine my life without you nearby,” I say, my voice tender.

“Neither can I, princess,” he earnestly replies.

A sweet giggling laugh makes us remember the world around us, and I step away, letting go of Tarrent’s hand. We carry on walking down the beach until we get to a massive bonfire, the smoky scent mixing with the scents of the humans and angels dancing around. The humans move their hips and bodies in ways I’ve never seen before, their lack of much clothing making me able to watch them so easily. Two angels swirl around each other, their dark wings like shadows dancing on their own.

There is a pile of bottles in the sand, with glasses next to them, and a female comes over with two glasses full of a white liquid. “Welcome. You both seemed a little lost over there.”

“New to the city,” Tarrent smoothly says as we both take a drink. “Many thanks.”

“May the goddess be with you,” the female replies, bowing her head. She looks at Tarrent for a second. “If you wish for my company, find me.”

I bristle at the flirty tone and the direct invite she just offered, as a growl echoes out of my throat. Tarrent wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me against him as the female cautiously watches me. “I will not. I have everything I need here.”

“You are a lucky female,” she replies to me. I bare my teeth at her, unable to help it, and she quickly walks off.

Tarrent chuckles low before lowering his lips to the tip of my ear. “Behave, princess.”

“She was rude,” I state, bringing the drink to my lips. I cough on the first sip, sweet but extremely strong and slightly addictive. Tarrent downs his drink in one go, and he doesn’t even blink.

“You have no reason to be jealous of her. I’m not interested,” he points out. I hand him my glass and walk away, needing a bit of space because he is right. I am jealous and I have no claim on him. When I head into the dancers, I close my eyes and let my body move. I lose myself for a moment, all the pressures of my life disappearing until there is nothing but the beat of the music controlling my body, and I sink into it. I enjoy it. My lips tilt up, and I swing my hips, a warm burn spreading across my chest.

Warm, large hands spread across my waist, and a hard body presses against my back. I let Tarrent move my hips with his, and I rest my head back on his shoulder as we dance. Time seems lost as we dance, our bodies one, and nothing in the world matters other than how his body moves next to mine.

“You’re driving me insane, princess,” he grumbles into my ear. “And I’d happily die letting you.”

I chuckle, turning my head to look up at him. He wraps his arms fully around me and softly smiles at me. “I love seeing you laugh. I love seeing you free.”

I lean up and kiss him softly. Just once. When I pull back, his eyes are brighter than I’ve ever seen them. “That kiss was free.”

He laughs and spins me around in his arms as the song stops, and we stand in the sand for a moment, smiling at each other. “Another drink?”

“Yes,” I reply, heading over to the bottles with Tarrent. We both try several coloured drinks until I find a pink cocktail of some sort that tastes amazing, and I drink three of them before the music starts playing again. This time the beat of the music is faster, and people are dancing in a circle around the fire, lifting their feet fast and clapping to the beat. We join them, and I laugh the entire time, my soul free. Tarrent never stops touching me, and I find myself reaching for him often too. I barely notice anyone else here, other than him. It’s like my world begins to spin around just for him. Eventually the songs become slow and quiet, and Tarrent picks up a bottle of the pink drink I like before we head to the edge of the water and sit in the sand. I lie back and look up at the stars. Millions, trillions of them fill every inch of the night sky, and I point at a bunch of the stars that look like an archer with a bow.

“Borealis,” Tarrent murmurs before I can ask. “At least my mother told me about it. Apparently, Borealis was a goddess of the hunt, loved by the witches, and when she died, every witch in existence cast a spell at the same time and made her into the stars.”

“I wish I knew about the old gods,” I softly say, picking up on his own turmoil over his mother. “I was never taught much of them.”

“Draycian was alive back then, ask the old bugger,” Tarrent suggests with a playful grin.

I laugh and knock his shoulder as waves crash over my feet, and the world feels warm and fuzzy. I take the bottle from him and take a long sip before he takes it from me. “Careful. If I take you back drunk to the king, he might actually kill me.”

“He doesn’t control me,” I reply, taking the bottle back from him.

Tarrent sighs but he doesn’t stop me, and I like him for that. If this is a mistake, I want to make it myself. I want to

live, and you can't live without making mistakes. Even if they hurt.

“Why are you my friend?”

My random question makes him look away from the stars to me.

“Because I think you're gorgeous, beautiful, and I don't class you as just my friend,” he replies, making my cheeks burn.

“Tarrent, you must have every witch in your city wishing to be with you. You're here chasing around a wolf shifter with a crapload of problems.”

He chuckles and I feel the laugh right down to my bones. “You always put yourself down. Your problems are mine until you ask me to leave.”

That makes my heart pound more than the dancing or drink.

“Then so are yours,” I reply, watching his eyes. “I'll fight with you, if Arawn doesn't kill me first. Or the Wolven gods.”

I take another long drink.

“No one will harm you.”

I blink at his furious, possessive tone and turn my gaze onto his.

My witch lord.

I hiccup before I start to chuckle, and Tarrent's eyes soften as he pulls the bottle from my hands and sees it's nearly empty. “Your head is going to hurt in the morning, princess.”

“Will you be there to kiss it before?” I ask.

“If you weren't drunk, you wouldn't ask that,” he murmurs as I look at his lips.

“I always think it, but I don't want to betray Dray or Nakoa. But wanting you? That's real, no matter where I am,” I reply.

He cups my cheek. “Princess.”

“My name is Serendipity,” I correct with a smile, and I lean forward to kiss him. He tastes like the drink and him, that masculine undertone to it all that is completely addictive. He doesn’t say anything or even move, but slowly his lips move with mine. He grabs my waist and kisses me deeper, pushing me back on the sand and covering my body with his as he loses all control. I slide my hand down his bare back, and he pulls back. “You’ve been drinking. We should stop this for now.”

“No,” I say with a pout. “I’ve been locked up in that city for years and never had anyone touch me. I-I didn’t touch myself often. Never seems like it could be quite as amazing as someone else. I want you to touch me, Tarrent.”

He looks pained with indecision before he rests his forehead on mine. “You’re making this very hard for me to refuse.”

“Good,” I say with a grin. “That was the point.”

He chuckles and looks down at me. “Just touching. I won’t let tonight be our first time.”

I nod, my body burning and alive, desperate for him to touch me. He doesn’t disappoint. After he has made his mind up, he kisses me deeply and pushes up my dress, and seconds later I feel his hand disappearing underneath my panties and running up the core of me. “So wet, princess. Fuck, just touching you is going to make me come.”

His dirty words only make everything feel better, and when he slides a finger into me, I moan at the sensation. His tongue battles with my own as his thumb finds my clit, and he rubs me slowly. I was right, this feels so much better than when I touch myself. His lips fall down my jaw and to my neck as I arch my back. His teeth graze across my nipples under my dress, and it’s all too much.

“Tarrent, fires, gods,” I cry out as I climax, tightening around his finger and crashing into wave after wave of pleasure. Hazy, I look up at Tarrent, and his eyes watch me softly before he pulls his hand away from me and slowly licks his finger. My cheeks burn as his eyes close.

“Thank you,” I find myself saying.

He shakes his head and picks me up onto his lap, nuzzling into my neck. “No, thank you. I’ve wanted to do that since we met.”

“I’ve thought about doing much more,” I murmur, and his hands tighten on me. I chuckle and push him back in the sand before picking up the bottle and taking a deep sip before offering it to him. “Drink with me, witch lord.”

“Anytime, princess,” he replies before taking the bottle. Three bottles later, when the sun is rising once more, Tarrent pulls me into his chest. I grin as I feel his magic stretch around us, and then we are falling, crashing, and my stomach twists until I feel sick. The castle feels cold compared to the beach, but the burning fiery eyes of the king are a stark contrast to it.

Dray stands in the middle of the room, looking furious as he takes us both in. I giggle and push away from Tarrent. I’m pretty sure I zigzag my way over to Dray, and he catches me as I all but jump into his arms. “Hey, grumpy dragon. Do you know how to smile? I can teach”—hiccup—“teach you.”

“My queen is drunk,” Dray angrily growls, shaking the ground under us. “You’re dead, witch.”

“Nope,” I say, pushing away from Dray. “Nope, nope, nope. No death, please and thank you. It’s boring and annoying, and I was free today. I had fun! Dray-Dray.”

Dray looks down at me, his expression pained and maybe a tad amused. “I will handle you in a second.”

Sickness rises in my throat, and before I can stop it, I puke all over the floor and Dray’s feet. Dray immediately picks up my hair and holds me until it stops.

The sick disappears, and I feel refreshed, only to notice magic in the air and look over to Tarrent a few feet away. He winks at me before walking out, and before Dray can say much, I shift into my wolf. My wolf brushes against Dray, and he shakes his head before picking up my wolf and carrying me back to our room.

“If you want to have fun, ask me. You don’t have to run away,” Dray whispers to my wolf. “I want to make you smile like you did when you appeared with the witch.”

The sadness in his voice makes my heart lurch, right before I pass out.

Thirty-Eight



BLACK ROSE *petals fall down on me as I lie on a bed, so many of them covering my body as I sit up, letting them float down. I nervously look around at our room, noting how cold and dark it is as I pick up a black petal and close my palm around it.*

I didn't have Dray down as a male who fills a bed with petals. "Dray?"

My voice echoes unnaturally, and a chill snakes down my spine as I find Dray. He is seated on the window seat, looking out at the city, and I sigh in relief as I take him in. He is wearing black leathers, the usual clothing for him, and his golden hair is swept to one side. I can't see his face as I climb off the bed, but the memories of when we were awake fill my mind. I need to talk to him, and maybe he needs to speak to me too, and that's why we are here.

I almost missed these dream land visits.

I flinch as my feet touch the cold floor, the beams creaking, and Dray stands up, facing me, still hidden in the darkness of the room. I walk over to him, standing right in front of him and wondering why he looks down at me with such...emptiness.

The empty gaze is a stark contrast as he wraps his hands around my waist and pulls me up for a kiss, pressing me against him. I'm shocked for a moment, but he kisses me harder, pushing away any of the doubts or worries I have. He sinks his hands into my hair before tightening his grip, almost punishing me, and part of me wonders how angry he is with

me. His lips push harder onto mine right before he bites down on my bottom lip, hard enough to draw blood, and I cry out, pushing him away. His grip on my hair is tight, and I can't move at all, even as he lets my bottom lip go and I taste my blood in my mouth.

He swiftly snaps my neck back, baring my throat, and he leans down to kiss my neck. It all feels wrong.

“Dray, let me go right now. I fucking mean it.”

Panic laces my voice, and he only laughs, the deep sound echoing around me. I scream and kick, struggling against his iron tight grip, but it doesn't work. He is holding me too tightly, and every time I struggle, he only hurts me more.

Suddenly his appearance changes, shimmering like water on a mirror, and his true self appears, near enough stopping my heart with fear.

Arawn.

He kissed me, bit me, and somehow got into my dreams. Fucker.

My blood pours down my chin from my lip, and he watches it with blatant desire. “What do you want?” I ask.

He smirks, pulling my hair tight and making me wince. “We were friends for such a very long time, and this is the reaction I get? What did I do to deserve such a cold welcome?”

“Do you want a list?” I growl out.

I grit my teeth together to stop screaming as he leans closer, his hot breath blowing against my face. “I fixed your entire life, Serendipity Fall. First, I got you out of the city like you wanted, and then I took your life to force Draycian to share his power with you. Now you're powerful enough to beat him, to take the throne, and you are not even thankful.”

“You're insane. I never asked for any of that,” I bite out. “I wanted out of a planned mating, not to die!”

“Death is the beginning, so it is written,” he replies. “You've still not quite realised it yet, have you? How fun it's

going to be to show you what you can do. What you really are under all that pretence of being weak.”

“I am not weak or pretending to be.”

He chuckles. “We finally agree on one thing. You are not weak.”

“Let me go, Arawn,” I snap. “This is only a dream, and when I wake up, you will still be miles from me.”

“Are you missing me?” he questions, his voice laced with amusement. “Have the males around you not dared to pleasure you yet? Are they still arguing about who gets to fuck you first? At this rate, it will be I.”

Disgust fills my chest, and I bare my teeth at him. “Never going to happen, Arawn.”

“It will,” he replies. “So sweet, virgins are. You are everything to my future, and we will enjoy each other. Don’t worry, we’ll be together soon.”

“I don’t want to be with you. Ever. Leave me alone.”

“Never,” he replies, grabbing my wrist and finally letting my hair go. He grips the Wolven mark on my wrist, pressing his finger deeply into the mark. “We are bound deeper than you can imagine.”

I stumble away from him when he lets me go, and he looks out to the city. “Kiss your king and wait. I’m coming soon, and I’m going to kill him right in front of you. You’re going to watch his world burn with me.”

“You’ll never be able to kill Dray. You ran from him,” I remind Arawn, hating his confidence. “If it’s the last thing I do in this world, I will kill you. I let you out of your prison. You will die because of me.”

He whacks me hard across the face, moving in front of me in a blink, and I tumble to the floor with the force, my cheek throbbing and my jaw aching as I glare up at him, brushing my hair out of my face.

He crouches down with an evil smile. “Everyone has a weakness, Serei. I know yours, but you do not know mine.

Don't play games with immortals. You will lose."

He slams his fist into my face one more time, and everything flickers out into darkness.

The sheets around me are covered in sweat when I wake up, my heart pounding and my ears ringing as I try to calm down. I reach up for my lip, but it's not bleeding anymore. He didn't hurt me outside of the dream, which means he hasn't got the control he thinks he has. I sigh and wince, my head hurting like I've smacked it on a wall a dozen times. I think that has less to do with Arawn and more to do with several bottles of pink cocktails that Tarrent and I drank last night.

Not that I regret even a single moment of it.

My cheeks flush as I think about Tarrent and our moments together. My whole body feels like it's on fire as I remember coming back to the castle and Dray being there. By the fires, the things I said to him. I blow out a breath, clutching the sheets to my naked body. I must have passed out in my wolf form, judging by the fur in the bed. Light pours in from the window, and it hurts my eyes as I blink a few times, adjusting to the brightness. I keep the sheet around me as I head to the window and fully open the curtains so the room is flooded with light before I look up. I'm guessing it is morning from how bright the city is and from my rumbling stomach. A shower, food, and a new head are what I need.

I pause on my way to the bathroom, my hand going to my lips. The painting of Sallette is gone, leaving an empty space with vines of jasmine crawling around the place where it was.

He took it down. There is no other way it could be anything else. It makes me smile, and any burning, jealous thoughts about his ex-lover being back slowly fade away as I smile to myself. Maybe we aren't so doomed after all.

Everything feels better other than my thumping head as I head into the bathroom and start up the shower. I spend longer than necessary under the hot water, hoping it will help my head feel better, but it only makes it feel like drums are being blasted against my skull. After the shower, I dry and braid my hair before changing into leather pants and a long black shirt

that is skintight with long black sleeves. I pull out my necklace and touch it, wondering when I will be able to tell Nakoa all about the dancing and the Fenrir Kingdom. I'm sure he has been there before, and I want to know more.

First, I need to speak to Draycian. I treated my mate pretty badly last night, mostly because I was angry about Nakoa and I was drunk. I can't get the sadness I heard in his voice out of my head. I pull the sheets off the bed and remake the bed with fresh sheets I find in a drawer before heading out of my room. My stomach grumbles as two guards bow to me, both of them on either side of the door.

"Where is Draycian?" I question.

"This way, my queen."

I nod at the guard who leads me across the throne room and to the other side, past the private rooms and to a set of large oak doors. The guard knocks once before opening the door and waving me in.

"Thank you," I tell him as I head inside, the warmth of the room washing over me. A long table stretches out in the middle of the room, and it's made of white oak, by the looks of it, matching the doors. Several bouquets of red roses and sunflowers line the table in the centre, and at least eight chairs are pushed up to the left side of the table with many people on them. At the other end of the table are several small bowls of various fruits and meats, breads and a spread of cakes. My stomach rumbles louder.

Dray is at the head of the table, and he stands up the second I walk in. "How are you feeling?"

His deep voice is almost a grumble, and I keep my eyes on him. "Erm, good. Hungry."

"Do eat," he commands, waving a hand at the food.

I still keep searching his eyes, and I want to tell him how sorry I am, but someone clears their throat. For a moment, I thought we were alone. Or I didn't notice anyone else. We are definitely not alone. Sallette is sitting at the side of the table, near Draycian, and she smiles sweetly at me. I smile back as I

take in her long black hair pulled up in a high ponytail, braided at the sides. She's wearing a black dress that's got a low dip in the front and several V-shaped chains falling down her neck towards the drop, with that strange topaz necklace hanging between them all. Similar black chains are wrapped around her upper arms, along with black crests of dragons. On her other side is Sophie, and she barely looks at me as she stares at her plate. She looks very out of place here, and I wonder if she will ever truly fit in. On the opposite side of the table, nearest me, is Devika, and I give her a true smile. She nods at the chair next to her, and I walk over, sitting down on the soft seat.

Everyone immediately carries on eating, and I vaguely hear Sallette pick up a conversation with Draycian in the background as I pour myself a big glass of water and drink it in one. It doesn't help with my head.

"I heard you and my brother had a fun time yesterday," Devika says, not lowering her voice at all.

I hear Dray pause mid-sentence, his gaze locking onto me, but I don't dare look his way.

Despite the water, my mouth feels dry as I look down at my empty plate. "Yes, we had a good time in the Fenrir Kingdom. I'm going to get some food."

Devika rolls her eyes as I make my escape to pick up my food, and I choose several pieces of toast and fruit before sitting back down.

Dray only starts to eat when I sit back down, and I notice. I notice everything about him, even when I try not to.

After a few pieces of toast, and when I'm certain they aren't going to come back up, I look across the table at Sophie. "I haven't seen you much since I got back. How are you?"

"Very well, thanks," she blurts out, near enough jumping at my question. I feel bad for asking. "How are you?"

"Fine," I answer with a small smile, and Sophie nods, tucking some of her hair behind her ear. Well, that conversation was long and distracting, like I wanted. Not.

Sallette fills the silence. "Devika Bloodsong, is it?"

“Salette... What is your last name again?” Devika replies to her question with her own, leaning back in her seat. Devika’s long hair is braided similar to mine, and she is wearing all black leathers that are more like a corset around her top half.

Salette smiles. “I come from a time where our last names were simply of which house we swore to. I swore to the house of Bloodsong many, many years past.”

“Did you have children? Could we be related?” Devika asks outright.

“I had four sisters, so perhaps,” she vaguely replies, and Devika’s hand tightens on the fork she is holding. “I’ve seen you around the castle, along with your brother. What are two powerful witches doing here when you could be in your own city?”

“I could say the same for you,” she replies.

Salette looks at Dray, who doesn’t look her way. No, his eyes are on me. “I have many reasons for staying here. I don’t see that you and your brother have the same.”

The conversation goes still, and I keep eating, even when the food is now churning in my stomach.

“Here,” Devika says with a sigh, handing me a small vial of something unknown. The liquid within it is red and swirling on its own.

“What is it?”

“I wasn’t sure I wanted to give you it when you went partying without me, but I’m being nice,” she says, arching an eyebrow. “It’s a cure for drinking too much. Witch herbs. Drink it in one and you will feel good.”

I don’t even blink before popping the cap off and drinking it. I wince at the awful taste, but my headache starts to fade and I no longer feel sick. “Thanks, and next time, I will take you with me.”

“You better, bitch,” she replies with a grin.

“Who said there will be a next time, Serendipity?”

I look up at Dray's dark statement. He rarely calls me by my full name, and it surprises me for a second.

"I—"

The doors open behind me, and Tarrent confidently strolls in, the tension in the room apparently unnoticeable, or he simply doesn't care. He takes a seat right next to me, his arm brushing against mine, and a shiver of heat spreads from the small touch.

"I see my sister gave you some of her healing remedy before I could," Tarrent says, leaning an elbow on the table and looking right at me.

"Too slow, brother," Devika replies with a smug smile.

"Hello," I say.

"Good morning, princess," he replies, running his eyes over me. I clear my throat and go back to my food, feeling several pairs of eyes on me.

"Ah, I have my answer," Sallette says, and I look up at her.

"What answer?" I question.

"So you're the witch lord. Tarrent Bloodsong?" Sallette questions, ignoring me to run her eyes over Tarrent. Assessing him.

"Yes," Tarrent smoothly replies. "As a witch, you are a subject of mine, and you are welcome in my city when you wish."

"You're a child compared to me," she replies with a tilt of her head, "to many in your city, I presume."

"You presume wrong," Devika snaps. "And he is your lord. Show respect, even if you are an old witch."

I look at Dray, and he looks ready to explode with tension, his eyes flickering with shock. "Do you see it now, Draycian? Whatever happened last night must have built on the bond."

"I see it," Draycian states, his voice calm, but it's deadly.

“Why are you mad? What bond?” I question, crossing my arms. “What are you talking about?”

“He is your mate,” Sallette announces.

I chuckle. “Yes, everyone knows that. Dray is my mate.”

“Not him,” Sallette says with a smile. “The witch lord at your side. Seems the gods have decided you are to belong to more than one.”

Tarrent is my mate.

The world pauses and spins too quickly as I look at him, my fork and knife falling from my grip. I have more than one mate? How is that even possible and, furthermore, why didn't he tell me? Why didn't Devika tell me? She must have known. I wondered why I trusted Tarrent from the second we met and always felt safe, why I was so attracted to him.

It's a mate bond.

How could I have not seen it? Felt it?

“Are we mates?” I ask a silent Tarrent, his blue eyes searching my own, and he offers me his hand.

“Let's go and talk somewhere else,” he asks.

“No,” I say, standing up and backing away from the chair. “You said you had a mate. Did you always know it was me?”

“Yes,” he answers. “When I was looking for my sister, I felt you appear closely. I didn't know you, but your scent, your presence, it was drawing me to you. That's why I was close by when Devika found me, because it was you I was tracking. I knew the second I saw you why. Sometimes it takes a while for the female to sense the same bond. I was hoping you'd realise it first before I had to tell you.”

“Why didn't you tell me last night? You could have told me any time last night!”

“You asked for a fun night. Nothing serious,” he reminds me. “I couldn't take that from you.”

I close my eyes only to open them as a chair scrapes back and falls onto the floor as Dray storms out of the room.

“Dray, wait!” I shout, but he doesn’t pause, and I rush after him only for Sallette to step in front of me, her hand held up.

“I think you’ve done enough. Why don’t you stay with your mate while I go and chase your other one?” she suggests with a coy smile. “It’s clear you’ve chosen your side.”

I glare at her as she walks away, not giving me a chance to answer, and I never even thought of it as choosing sides.

Turning, I look at Devika, who is resting her head on her hands. “Welcome to the family.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “You should have told me. You’re my friend, and this isn’t something a friend would do.”

“You’re right. It was shitty of me,” she admits. “I’m sorry but it was not my secret to tell.”

“Accepted,” I tell her. I’m not really angry at her, and we both know it.

Tarrent walks over to me, placing his hand on my arm, and I jolt away. “I understand. Come to me if you wish. I’ll wait.”

I turn and walk away, needing some space from Tarrent to think, and I need to find Dray, no matter what Sallette thinks. I haven’t chosen a side. Following Dray’s scent, I walk around the maze of the castle until I come to a large open living area, filled with jasmine plants and bookcases filled with old books that stretch to the ceiling. There’s a massive pond at the back of the room, with rows of mirrors on the stone wall that make it bright.

Dray and Sallette are sitting on the wall around the pond, and Sallette is running her fingers through the water. I hover behind the wall, listening to their conversation, even when I know I shouldn’t.

“Leave me,” Dray commands. He sounds furious, and my heart drops. He is angry with me, and I don’t have a clue how to fix this.

He waited so long for me, and I’m just letting him down.

I’m failing at everything. If he knew the truth about the Wolven gods and how they expect me to kill him, would he

hate me?

Would he try to kill me?

“No, you need me,” Sallette softly replies, and I close my eyes. “Is she really worth all this when she clearly will choose the witch lord? They clearly spent last night very close enough, and she is running from you. You deserve someone who will be at your side and never run.”

“She didn’t run this time. She lived,” he growls at Sallette. “Just leave. I don’t like the reasons why you are here, and this conversation isn’t going to end how you wish.”

“Do you remember this room? How you stripped me naked on this very wall and fucked me for hours, Dray?” she questions, and bile crawls up my throat. “You told me you loved me, and I loved you. We were so good together. I’d never run from your side.”

The silence seems to echo in the same beat as my heart. When Dray speaks, he sounds so tired. “When I think of you, and have done a few times over the years, I feel nothing but guilt. Not just for your death, but the fact I didn’t love you as I should have done and I was not in love with you. I care about you, Sallette, but you deserve someone who really does love you. Who would do anything for you, and that will never be me.”

“No, wait—”

“Sallette, listen to me. I know I never loved you, because the moment I met her, I realised what it was to be truly in love with someone,” he frustratedly interrupts her. “And it upsets my queen to have you here. I will find you somewhere safe to go, but you must leave soon.”

“Draycian, please,” she pleads, and I hear him stand. “She is going to ruin you and leave you for that witch. You will be alone.”

“I will take even a shadow of her running from me than nothing at all or anything from you,” he solemnly replies, “because she is my mate, and I will do anything, even let her go, to make her happy.”

He walks out the door and looks down at me, offering me his hand. He knew I'd been here the entire time, and I don't even have it in me to apologise for eavesdropping. It reminds me of Tarrent offering the same thing, and I know he sees that too. I take his hand and link our fingers. He guides me down another corridor and into the room I took my mama and Valentine into, before closing the door. I watch him as he goes and sits on the sofa, spreading his arms across the back and spreading his legs.

"In a week, it is time for the celebration of Mnemosyne, and I wish for you to be at my side at the ball," he begins, his voice tight. "If you wish to leave after, I understand, and I will not stop you."

The celebration of Mnemosyne is a massive party across the entire city, but I've never been able to attend any of it. I've watched it from the castle windows. I can't believe this is what he wants to talk about. Why would he think I'd leave? "A ball?"

"Yes. It has been too long since we celebrated in the way we used to. I will give Reine keys to the treasury, where you can choose a dress and crown," he states, looking at the roaring fireplace. "When you leave, I wish for you to take guards of my choosing."

"Why do you think I will leave?"

He finally looks up at me, his gold eyes tired. I miss the burning flame within them. "Because you love him and not me. Because I love you and want you happy. I will find Arawn and kill him. You will be safe."

"Dray," I whisper, tears falling down my cheeks as I walk over to him. I fall to my knees between his legs, and he goes still as I look up at him. "You're a fool at times, my king. I don't want to leave, not unless you want me gone. I love you. Those words seem small, but I mean them. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you. I want you."

It's true, more than he will ever be allowed to find out. The Wolven gods can fuck themselves for all I care. I could never kill him, and if they kill me instead, then so be it. As long as

he is alive. My shoulders fall as he slides off the sofa and kneels in front of me, cupping my face. “I don’t deserve you or your love.”

“You’re wrong,” I thickly whisper. “I need you to do something for me, though. Nakoa.”

His gaze sharpens, and I sigh as he lets me go and stands up. “He broke a vow to me. He is not your mate, Serei; it is not like the witch.”

I stand up after him and watch him walk to the flames. My voice cracks. “I love him too. He has suffered enough.”

“No, he has not,” Dray states, his voice cold. “I will not change my mind, Serei, so if you wish to leave still, then you may go. Nakoa will stay here.”

I let out a frustrated cry and turn away, storming to the door and grabbing the handle. I pause before I walk out and look back at my king. “See you at the ball, my king.”

The ball is a perfect distraction for Tarrent. He can get Nakoa out, and then I can decide what to do with my stubborn dragon king and the little time we have left.

Thirty-Nine

ℒ

NIMUE "NIMMY" WINDSHIRE

I SIT in the library at a wooden table, two books spread out in front of me, and an enormous yawn escapes my lips as my eyes drop. I shake my head and push my red curls behind my ear. I cannot fall asleep again. Apollon will never let me live it down. I keep going down the many, many lists of names of wolves that have entered the city. My eyes begin to droop once more as I continue to go through the descriptions of each person. Blonde of hair, brown of hair, blue-eyed, purple-eyed, but none of it matching exactly what my aunt looks like. Nor my cousin. They both have hair as red as my own, and they should be easier to find, but with the recent war killing so many, and many new wolves entering the city, the records are all over the place. My aunt and cousin match very little, and the few descriptions we found that do match have turned out to be someone else when we went to meet them. All six times in one long month.

“Wake up, sleepy,” Apollon teases as he sits down opposite me, scenting of coffee and burning fires on a cold night. He places two books on the table next to the five he’s already gone through this morning before going for a coffee. He never stops working, always at my side, and we have swiftly become...friends.

“At least I don’t drink coffee to stay awake,” I mutter.

He laughs, the sound soothing to me, and I smile at him. “Your rose-flavoured herbal tea is worse.”

“It’s lovely,” I say with a coy smile.

He grins at me, and the playful moments with him make my day. My week. My year, if I'm being honest. I know he is staying so close to me because he is my guard while we are in this foreign and strange city, and I admire how seriously he takes my protection. He is loyal and strong, and everything a guard should be. He sleeps when I sleep, in an adjoining room, and I listen to his light snores every night through the wall until they lull me to sleep. Truthfully, I think I will miss the soothing fact he is there, protecting me, when he is called back to the city.

Which could be any day.

A pinch of panic takes over as I look over at my dragon guard, taking in his white hair, deeply tanned skin and the new black leathers that tightly fit his strong body.

He's my friend, even if he does smell absolutely incredible and I think of him more than I should do. I'm always keenly aware of his presence, and I can't think of anything else but it.

I go back to my list as the doors of the library open, and I glance over, expecting one of the library keepers, but instead it's the kind Omega Breelyn. There are two omegas, but as I've learnt, one is frightening, and the other isn't as much. They are both betas of the pack too, and I wouldn't like to be pitted against either of them in a fight. Even the thought of fighting leads me back to my mornings with Apollon in the training room as he tries to teach me how to defend myself. And fails.

Turns out I'm terrible with swords, daggers and bows, let alone hand-to-hand combat. But my wolf...she could use her teeth, at least. Breelyn searches the room before she finds us and smiles, walking our way. We both stand as she reaches our table, and I try not to look at the claw marks on her cheek, or the defensive way she holds herself.

She might not ever say it, but a victim of abuse can see another one so easily. She gives me hope that I can be like her one day—mated with a child. Happy.

I bow my head along with Apollon, and Breelyn inclines her head. "Good to see you both. I had wondered how you

were settling in.”

“Well,” I answer. “I love the castle. I never get lost here.”

“The castle just tells you where to go, doesn’t it?” she agrees. “I love it as well. When I’m looking for my little one, I only have to think about it and I’m soon being shown the right way.”

I smile at her and turn to Apollon, who is watching me, and I wonder if he misses his home. We have talked about so many things, like his upbringing and training under the king and my childhood years, but never about the current situation we are in. He doesn’t say it, but he worries about his king, his friends, and family within the city we left. I worry too. Breelyn clears her throat. “Queen Mai would like to see you outside in the courtyard. She is getting a carriage ready with my mate, who will be your escort.”

“Escort us where exactly?” Apollon questions.

“I will let Mai tell you both. I believe she has some very good news for you, Nimue,” she says with a small smile, and my heart pounds in my chest. Could it be news about my family? Could they be found?

“Thank you, we will make our way there,” Apollon says for me as I’m suddenly lost for words.

“Good luck,” she softly tells me, reaching out to squeeze my upper arm. Knowing she means well, I try not to flinch. “I will see you both soon. I have three boys to take to training: my son, the prince and his cousin. Wish me luck in finding them all.”

“Goodbye, Breelyn,” I say before we all walk out of the library and into the corridors of the castle. Breelyn leaves us halfway through the castle.

“Don’t run! You have training! Your dads will be waiting, and I can’t be late chasing you both again! Goddess, help me,” Breelyn frustratedly shouts, and I catch a glimpse of a boy with curly hair, dark green eyes and a cheeky smile running away from Breelyn before we carry on down the corridor. That must be the prince, the young alpha and Serei’s brother. I

haven't formally met him, but I've seen him running around, and I've heard from the maids that he is a troublemaker. Apollon walks at my side as I run myself, hurriedly rushing through the castle until we get to the upper floor, past the statues and into the bright courtyard. There isn't a cloud in the sky, and the air is warm enough to not need a cloak like many of the shifters wear here.

Queen Mairin is waiting with Callahan, an angel beta of the pack and Breelyn's mate. They both incline their heads, and I bow my head back to them along with Apollon in greeting. We both are careful to be respectful of their life and the chance they've given us inside this palace, even if Mai insists we don't call her Queen Mairin out loud, at least. The pack lands themselves are incredible, and I've only seen a small part of it and wish to see it all. One of the most interesting parts of the city is the people and how every inch of the land is bursting with life. As much as I liked the dragons' city, it's not the same as it is here. Children run around freely, and there is never a silent part of the city. Everyone respects the alphas with such love, and those touched by the war seem to enjoy every second of life they are given in respect for those who died fighting for that freedom.

I can't help but love that about them.

"Nimmy, I have great news!" Mai says excitedly, her black cloak swishing around her as she walks to me, flashing the daggers on her thighs and waist. "We have found a female and male that we believe are your aunt and cousin. We are not a hundred percent sure, but it all adds up."

My heart pounds louder, and I'm scared to even hope. "Really?"

"Yes. Are you ready?" she questions. "We can leave now."

I have wanted to see them for so long, and yet some part of me is nervous about seeing them. What if they don't want to see me?

I've changed so much from the young teenager they'd remember, and not all of it is good. I may be older, but I don't believe I'm wiser. I'm broken and scarred, marked by males

who I could not fight off, and I'm not sure I even know how to be happy anymore. The teenager they remember used to sing soft songs, dance for fun, and smile at every joke my cousin told me. But now, he is going to be a male that I don't know, but he is family. I can't wait to see him, even if I'm nervous.

Everyone is looking at me, and my hands begin to shake just as a warm, large hand slides into mine. I look up at Apollon in shock, and he nods at me. "They will love you, and today will be a happy day. The fates led you here, remember?"

I really do believe it. That fate led Serei to me and drew my path all the way to this point. To where I could find true happiness, I could find my family that I've dreamed of for so long.

"I'm ready."

Mai nods and Callahan opens the door to the red carriage for us all to climb inside. Apollon holds my hand all the way to the carriage and helps me in before letting go, and Callahan closes the door as I sit next to Mai.

Callahan takes to the skies outside as I lean back, Apollon sitting opposite me. The carriage ride is quiet for a long time, only the sound of the wheels creaking filling my ears. Apollon crosses his enormous arms. "Did I hear engines yesterday?"

"Yes," Mai replies. "Ragnar was practising driving. We don't use them often anymore as fuel is hard to find and expensive to trade. We also found the engines frightened many of the older wolves in the lands who are unused to modern technology."

"Dying technology, as my people call it. Humans rose so high with everything they invented," Apollon states. "Only to fall low."

Mai nods and looks at me. "Nimmy, that reminds me, my daughter asked how you were, and I told her I would say hello to you."

I smile. "I miss her."

"So do I. I feel like I didn't really know my daughter, all of her, until that visit," she tells us. "When this Arawn is dealt

with, I look forward to spending more time with her.”

“Is she okay? Is Arawn gone yet?” I ask.

“She is well and Arawn is a dead male walking this earth, fallen god or not,” Mai vows and sighs. “Dip—I mean, Serei—is dealing with the males around her, from what I could tell.”

She pauses and looks between Apollon and me. “What can you two tell me about them? This Nakoa and Tarrent?”

“Not so much. I only met them both for a short time,” I admit.

“Well, I cannot say much for the witch lord, but from the little I got to know him, he’s a decent male who spent many years searching for his sister, who loves him dearly. He’s quite infatuated with your daughter. That much was clear to anyone looking, and he fought to protect her. He is powerful and handles Serei better than most,” Apollon explains. “As for Nakoa, he is one of the bravest males I know and a true friend to me. I can’t get him out of the prisons, the dungeons, mostly because he believes he deserves to be in there for breaking his vows and falling in love with your daughter. He argued with his feelings for a year, and I told him often to leave and let her be. He couldn’t and I understand that loyalty now.”

He looks at me for a second before focusing back on Mai. “I believe you’d like Nakoa very much, possibly more than the king.”

“I never said I dislike the king. I’m quite used to grumpy alpha males. It’s different when they’re not your mates and you wish them to stop speaking,” she admits with a chuckle. “I actually think Serei and he are quite well suited.”

Apollon smiles and inclines his head. “I agree. They are both stubborn.”

“And impulsive,” Mai mutters. Apollon grins at me, and I know he wants to agree with the queen, and I can’t help but grin too. I watch the streets like they are a movie, so peaceful and normal. It reminds me of my life before the war, before the angel king. Our pack wasn’t much and tiny in numbers, but

we lived in peace. The humans around us didn't have a clue we were shifters, and we kept it that way so that we wouldn't be forced into the lands the humans had divided from the world for shifters. We had a small house with faded yellow paint on the door and pots of hydrangeas that my aunt loved to grow. My cousin's bike was always outside, thrown in the path along with his shoes, and it's funny how it's those little things I miss. I sigh and watch the streets pass, promising myself I won't cry if this isn't them. That I won't give up hope. The houses blur along with the streets, and we come to a stop outside a row of blue terrace houses with one missing at the end, which looks destroyed and left in nothing but rubble, and I wonder what happened.

"This is a newer part of the city, rebuilt after the war. Can you believe this street was only dust and rocks until five years ago?" Mai says and I hear the pride in her voice. "Our builders, which Henderson manages, have built the lands so well. Well, except for that house at the end. That was destroyed when a bunch of teenagers had a party and...well, male wolves. Between you and me, they won't destroy any more homes after Alpha Silas had a quiet word with them and no doubt scared the wolves out of their souls. Henderson has made them all work on their skills as builders before he will let them rebuild the house."

"I admit, I wish I grew up here," I tell her truthfully, as Callahan lands outside the door to the carriage. "It seems like a good place to grow up."

"We make it that way. For our children and theirs and the future we all fought for," Mai answers. "Let's find your family, Nimmy."

I nod, hope filling my heart as Callahan opens the door. I climb out first, coming to stand outside a blue, three-story house with brown-framed windows. There's a brown fence and gate, and pots of purple hydrangeas by the door.

Could it be?

I place my hand on my heart, feeling it racing so fast as I look at the shiny black door with a gold knocker in the middle.

Apollon comes to my side, close enough to brush his arm against mine. “One knock, Nimmy. I’ll be here every step of the way.”

“Do you need more time—” Mai pauses when the door on the house next door opens and an older female hobbles out with her walking stick clicking on the ground. I nearly jump as four brown-furred wolves rush past us, and Callahan mutters something about teenagers.

The older shifter immediately bows her head. “My queen, my alpha. What has you on my street? May I be of any assistance?”

“Yes, actually,” Mai says, smiling at her. “We are looking for the occupants of this house, Miss Bellixana Shire and Mr Graylin Shire.”

Bellixana was my aunt’s middle name, and Graylin was my father’s name. They could have easily changed their names to these. Because I know them.

The female nods once. “Oh, yes, they are my neighbours, but they aren’t in. Well, the teenager is at school at this time of day, but you will find Bellixana in the Wolves Royal Records. The new building is only around this corner. She works there.”

“Thank you,” Mai replies, glancing at me, and I nod to let her know I want to meet these people that could very well be my family. It feels hard to believe until I finally set my eyes on them. “You have been a great help.”

“I do hope they aren’t in any trouble. I can personally vouch for them. They are good wolves,” she adds in, moving a step forward. Her eyes fall on me. “How funny. You look just like Graylin. The same eyes and red hair.”

“I think they are my family, and I’ve been looking for them,” I inform her.

Her eyes soften. “Then I will leave you be. Good luck and may the gods bless this reunion.” The female goes back into her house, and I follow behind the queen, who clearly knows her way. Callahan stays close to her side, and I glance at Apollon. He looks down at me, and I try to breathe normally.

“Asking if you are nervous is pointless, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I chuckle. “Nervous is a limited word to describe my current feelings. Even my wolf feels like throwing up.”

“Tell your wolf I’ll stroke her anytime to calm her, if she wishes,” he whispers down to me.

My cheeks burn as my wolf, and I, very much like that idea. I don’t think Apollon meant it in the dirty way it came out, and I try not to smile at him as he goes back to watching around us for any danger. Many people stop the queen, most simply to ask if she needs help and how she is and to enquire if the prince is well. Some come over and speak to her like she personally knows them, and I admire that about her. No one seems to actually fear her, even when any fool could sense how powerful she is.

We eventually come around the corner of the houses to a massive pillared white building within a forest of tall, daunting trees. The building is right next to a river, and we walk past the river, which has several benches lining it where people are sitting and watching the glistening water softly flow past. We climb up the many rows of steps, and the doors are pushed open, pouring light inside. Our shadows stretch across the floor as we head inside and stop, and I can’t stop staring around me.

If I thought the library in the castle was big, this is gigantic. Rows of bookcases make a circle pattern below us, and this entire floor is made of some sort of glass, making it all viewable below. People filter in and out of the bookshelves, and there are several seating areas hidden within the shelves. I look up as I hear footsteps and see a woman with red hair walking up steps and heading right to us. The only sounds are the running river outside, birds chirping, and her footsteps as they slow, almost to a halt, before picking up.

I look around Callahan’s large wings that block most of my view straight ahead, and pause. A sob catches in my throat as I see my aunt for the first time in years. She confidently walks right for us, carrying three books in her arms and glasses buried in her messy bun of red curls. She doesn’t see

me at first, and I'm thankful for the seconds I get to breathe and take her in. Just as I remember, she smells like sunshine and the first drops of rain.

I walk around Callahan to stand in front of them both, and my aunt stops. She pauses and grabs for her glasses, pulling them down her face and staring at me through them. The books drop out of her hands as her mouth pops open, and then she's running for me at full speed. I feel frozen until she crashes into me, nearly picking me up and squeezing me tightly. I hug her back, forgetting how small and curvy she is, and end up resting my head on top of hers.

"I never thought I'd see you again, my darling Nimue. Oh my sweet girl," she says between sobs and tears. "Oh, we are blessed. So blessed. I could kiss all the gods for this."

Tears fall down my own cheeks and into her hair as I nod, unable to actually form words. She eventually pulls back to look up at me and takes my hands in hers. "This doesn't seem real. Are you really here?"

"I'm really here, Auntie B," I sob with a half laugh. "I'm here and we are together again."

"That day...when they took you. I wanted to jump off the boat and go to find you, but I couldn't leave my son. It tore me in two, and every single day, I've prayed to the gods for you to escape them and live. Even if it meant I never saw you again. This...I...," she says, tears falling freely, and she gulps.

"I know," I softly tell her. "And for the record, you did the right thing. I couldn't be saved at that time. Let's leave the past behind us."

She searches my eyes and nods. I hope she can't see everything I went through all these years, and I never want her to find out. It's not her fault.

This is a time for happiness. "I can't wait to see Graylin."

"He is so like you," she says with a giant smile. "Brave and fierce. He prayed for you, too."

I nod and wipe my eyes, letting her hands go. "This is my friend and guard, Apollon."

“A dragon?” she questions, picking up on his scent. She walks past me and goes to Apollon, immediately hugging him. He stands still for a second in shock before patting her back, and she basically hugs his abs with how tall he is. “Thank you for guarding my niece. My name is Bellixana, but family calls me Auntie B. You are family to me now, Apollon. I deeply admire your race, who saved many of my friends in the war and asked for nothing in return.”

“It was an honour, for both,” he replies, his cheeks brightening just enough to let me know he is blushing.

Auntie B lets him go and bows low to Mai and Callahan. “I am deeply thankful for your assistance in returning my niece to me.”

“She is a good friend of my daughter, the princess, and we will always help her,” Mai replies.

Auntie B looks over at me. “Your friend is the princess? Between the dragon and that, I wish to know how you got here. It sounds like quite a story.”

I chuckle. “It was. The princess, Serei, is quite amazing, and I wouldn’t be alive without her.”

She looks back to the queen. “Then my family owes yours.”

“No, my daughter wouldn’t allow it,” she replies. “But while we are here, are there any new updates from the research we tasked you with?”

“Ah yes, can I speak about it in front of my niece and Apollon?” she questions.

“Yes. They know of Arawn and the Vanir,” Mai says, and this piques my interest.

“Well, come with me. We found something this morning, but I’m not sure what help it will be,” she says, waving at the stairs. Apollon walks ahead and picks up the books for my aunt, who looks at him adoringly and winks at me. I chuckle as we all head down the stairs and into the library. I get lost within minutes as she guides us through the shelves and deep underground until we come to a table with a massive book laid

out on top of it. The book is as big as the entire table, which could easily seat eight people, and we all go to stand in front of it. Auntie B grabs a ruler resting on the floor and points at a passage on the left-hand side. All of it is in a language I can't read, but the paintings on the page are easy enough to recognise. Dragons, wolves, foxes and many other small creatures are on the edges, making a box around the passage.

“This is the old language of the gods. Some of the chosen Vanir were taught this by the goddess herself. This book must have been written by one of my kind who was around at that time, and it is impossible,” Apollon quietly says. “My king can read this and so can I. There were five others taught, and three are dead. I didn't write this, and I doubt the king did. We are all that is left.”

“Well, how brilliant this mystery is. We only just began translating it, very slowly, and we weren't sure we even got any of it right as there are only a few books that describe random symbols. I hoped the queen might be able to read it,” Auntie B explains. “This book tells the birth of the goddess Mnemosyne and the Vanir. The first ten pages are tales of males born in fire with great wings.”

“I cannot read this. Are you allowed to read this to us, Apollon?” Mai questions. “If it reveals any secrets that might harm the Vanir, it won't leave this room until we speak to King Draycian and my daughter.”

“We all agree on this,” Auntie B says.

Apollon leans on the table, reading it, his muscles flexing with the movement. “I've never heard this before. My king must know of it. Immediately.”

“What does it say?” I softly ask, placing my hand on his arm.

“It's a prophecy, and the author claims the goddess said it on her deathbed,” he breathes out. The next words echo, and magic feels locked into every inch of the room until it's deathly still.

“What has been taken must be forsaken.

When the embers fall, a new goddess will rise within.

When the bright goddess is created,

Long will wait the mated.

Come the embers and fall the mighty.

For none will stop her path for the righted.

All gods will bow to her.

Those Wolven into wolves will fall to her reign..."

We all go silent, and Mai looks at Callahan and finally back to Apollon. He leans away from the table and the book, crossing his arms. "We need to read the rest of this book and learn what we must about this new goddess. She will be able to stop Arawn."

"At what cost to the rest of the world?" Mai questions. "If the Wolven gods know of this..."

Who are the Wolven gods?

I don't ask or get a chance to say anything as Mai looks at me. "Nimue, will you and Apollon stay to help your aunt research this? Anything Apollon can read might be helpful. I think we are playing someone else's game. Maybe whoever wrote this book."

"Yes," I say, and Apollon nods, his eyes fixed on the book.

"We will make sure word of this reaches King Dracyan and my daughter," Mai says and looks at Callahan. "I need to see my alphas, and we must call the entire court in for an emergency meeting."

"Agreed," Callahan replies as he loops his arm around her and carries her off, his wings spreading out and fading into the distance of the shelves.

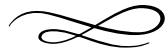
Auntie B claps her hands. "Time for a good cup of herbal tea, I think, before we get to work. Old gods or new can wait for some tea to be brewed."

I'm glad when Apollon looks away from the book, the shadows in his eyes fading for a second until he realises what

my aunt said. I chuckle as Apollon pulls a face and gulps. He looks more frightened of herbal tea than the gods. “Perfect, Auntie B.”

She hums to herself as she walks off, and I can’t help myself as I rest my head on Apollon’s large bicep and smile. I found my family...and as I look up into Apollon’s eyes, I think maybe I found so much more.

Forty



I'VE NEVER BEEN a fan of dresses, but today... today is an exception. The red dress I'm wearing is nothing short of something a princess would wear in a fairy-tale story, and yet I feel strange without my usual daggers clipped to my thighs. I have to admit, despite the fact I would much prefer to be wearing leggings and a shirt, this really is beautiful. The top half is incredibly detailed and pushes up my chest with the deep, blood red corset. The skirt has many layers, spread around me, and I run my finger up the silver leaves that make lines down the dress until wrapping around my waist and travelling up the corset at my sides. I stare at myself in the mirror, noting every inch of my skin that is shown off in the dress, and my black markings for the world to see. My hair is pulled up into a bun, showing off all my upper back, the ends curled and twisted, and it's very appealing.

Long black lines highlight my eyes, and my dark red lipstick matches my dress, and it goes well against my pale skin and dark hair.

Glancing down, I look at the small table by the mirror, the crown resting on it. I chose it yesterday when Reine and I were given the keys to the treasury by a grumpy Draycian, who left us alone with vague instructions on how to find the room. I figured he was grumpy about the many, many shifters in the castle, rushing around to get everything ready for the celebration. It took us two hours to find the right room, and by that point, both Reine and I were very annoyed. Reine looked ready to murder Dray, and I wasn't going to stop her.

Treasury is a bit of an understatement for the room. It's gigantic and filled with treasures of every kind, most I couldn't even imagine. Many of the corridors that spun off the main room called to me, and I could almost hear the whisper of voices. We found a room for the crowns and nothing else but the daises they were on first. Seven beautiful tiaras of all different shapes and colours rested next to eight different types of crowns, and three much smaller crowns that looked like they should belong to a child.

The tiara I chose was the one that caught my eye from the entire bunch, even if they were all very beautiful. It looks like a frozen flame until the light catches the large red ruby in the middle. Two smaller ones rest at the side of the large diamond-shaped ruby, all of them held together in a cast of thin gold. I pick it up and slide it into my hair, moving it into place and messing for a minute until it looks right.

For the first time since being mated, the reality that I'm their queen is sinking in. I catch a glimpse of the Wolven dragon mark on my arm, and my proud smile quickly fades. Dray hasn't found or heard anything from Arawn, and after telling him about my dream, he seems angrier and more irritated by the fact Arawn has all but disappeared from the world. We can pretend all we want that things are normal, but no balls or celebrations are going to make him go away when he is haunting me. We are connected, I can feel that.

"I think I could find Arawn," I quietly tell Reine. "There is this feeling in my chest, and I know if I portalled, thinking about him, I could find him."

Reine stands up off my bed, her dark purple dress moving and brushing across the floor. "Yes, and I believe that is what he wants. To push you into making a move based on your emotions. We both know you're smarter than him. One, but not all, of the reasons you are stronger than he is, is because you have so many standing at your side. He has no one."

"You told me my mother had a goddess bound to her soul, and she fought literal gods. I'm not her," I whisper. "I'm not a goddess with Hades at my side. How am I meant to beat a fallen god?"

“With one that is not fallen at all and your mate,” she replies, placing her hand on my arm. “Mai struggled too, even with all that power. More than once she almost lost everything, and I’m sure she doubted herself as much as you have. My sons were born gods, well before Hades ever spoke to them, and I brought them up. Trust one who has had much experience with gods. You are strong enough to stand against them. That, I’m certain of.”

I smile at her, taking a deep breath and calming my nerves. Tonight is not about Arawn. I can push thoughts of him aside for a bit. I take in Aunt Reine’s dress and how stunning she looks. She’s wearing a beautiful deep purple dress that goes well with her long black, braided hair, the same colour as mine now. She smiles softly at me and comes over to my side.

She pulls something out of a hidden pocket in the skirts of the dress, and I catch a flash of gold as she takes my hand and rests something cold in it. I look down to see a thin gold bracelet with a symbol of an upside mountain and five moons above it in a circle as the clasp. “This symbol stands for your home. Fall Mountain Pack. Never forget who you are, Queen Serendipity Fall.”

“It’s beautiful,” I say, letting her clip it onto my wrist where it fits perfectly. “Thank you so much.”

“This was a mating gift from my mate when I took the title of queen and alpha female. One of many gifts; my Soren did love to spoil me,” she softly says with a small, sad smile. “I know he is a male you never met, but I wish you did. He would have loved you and seen you as the treasured princess we all have done.”

“Are you sure you want me to have this?” I tenderly ask.

“Yes,” she firmly says, looking at me with soft eyes. My fierce aunt, for a moment, looks vulnerable. “I love you dearly, even if you’re not my daughter by blood. I see my best friend in your eyes, more than your mother at times, and my time bringing you up was a gift.”

“Then thank you. I will treasure it,” I tell her. “Why did you give me it tonight? My birthday is months away.”

She leads me over to the bed, and I sit next to her. “Because you’re finally a queen. The one I raised you to be. I can see it in your eyes. You’ve changed so much, grown up so much, and I’m very proud of you. Tonight is going to be my last night in the city for a while.”

“What? I say, shocked.

“I miss my home, my sons, and the pack I ruled for a long time,” she explains, crossing her arms. “I’ve enjoyed my time here with you, with the dragons I have become friends with, but you do not need me anymore. We both know that you have everything you need with those males of yours and your friends. I am certain that this is your fate, and mine is returning to my true home. The pack lands are going to be very difficult for me to walk back into without my mate and see where he died.”

She sighs as she looks away from me before continuing, “But maybe the memories that I have there can be a friend rather than an enemy I have avoided for too long.”

“I want you to do what you must. Just be happy, Aunt,” I tell her with a shaky smile. “But I hope you will come back to see me.”

“Nothing could keep me away for long,” she promises. “Family never fails to be there when you need them.”

The door is knocked twice before it opens, and Devika walks in, followed by Sophie, whose bright eyes search around the room before finding me. Devika places her hands on her hips, the floating sound of music echoing in the room before Sophie closes the door. Both of them are wearing beautiful dresses, not that I expected anything less. When I invited them to the ball, Devika made dozens of dresses appear with magic, and I watched her try them all on before making dresses for Sophie to try. Sophie chose a pale cream dress that’s got beautiful bright purple flowers wrapped around the corset and into the skirts, and she is a big contrast to Devika, who is wearing a formfitting, floor-length black dress. A long slit goes all the way up her thigh, where she’s proudly got a thigh

strap with a dagger resting there. Both of them have their hair down, Sophie's in soft curls and Devika's straight.

"You look so pretty," Sophie says with bright red cheeks. "I wanted to thank you again, for saving me and letting me live here. Everyone is kind, and I'm excited to see the celebrations tonight. I've never worn a dress like this that I chose, or gone to a ball that I had a choice in. This is my first night of freedom, and I have you to thank for it. So thank you."

"It suits you," I tell her with a smile, rising from the bed. "You look so pretty, Sophie. I'm the lucky one to have you as my friend, and you don't need to thank me."

"I do," she says, lifting her head. "I was born on the streets, dragged around and taught to be a pickpocket for a cruel man. When I was older, and prettier, he sold me to the males you found me with. I thought that was comforting. A bed, blankets and clothes...even with what they did there. But I was wrong. This is. I've never been safe and happy and looked after before now. I can't tell you in words how much I am thankful."

"Sophie," I whisper, walking over and pulling her into a hug. She smells like sweet flowers and chocolate, and I hold her tightly for a bit as I feel her tears drop onto my shoulder.

"Can I have a word?" Devika interrupts. "It's important, and I didn't know Sophie was going to make all of us emotional when we have makeup on."

I laugh with Sophie and Aunt Reine as I pull away and Sophie wipes her cheeks.

Aunt Reine comes over to Sophie's side. "I want to show you the dancing and the special imported food made for tonight. You will love it."

"I love dancing," she says brightly and lets Aunt Reine lead her out.

"That girl is too sweet for the life she has had," Devika comments with a sigh, but her eyes are haunted.

Sometimes I forget how she suffered the same as Sophie, because she is so strong and direct. Strong or sweet, trauma hits all the same.

“They are all dead,” I remind her.

“Not all of them. The guests still live,” she replies and curls her lip. “And one day, I’m going to hunt them in the same way they once hunted shifters and witches.”

“I’ll help,” I say.

“My brother said the same thing,” she replies. “You’re welcome as long as you don’t get in my way.”

“Never, we are friends,” I reply, and she nods once before clearing her throat. Witch words, foreign and ancient, roll off her tongue, and the room is encased in magic within moments.

“Soundproof,” she explains to me. “Just so we’re not heard by anyone. I’ve learnt the dragons in this city are a little nosey, aren’t they?”

I laugh and wink at her. “I’ve never noticed.”

“Tarrent sent me,” she starts, and my breath halts in my throat. “He’s breaking him out tonight, lowering the wards on the city and the castle and taking Nakoa to our city. I will be going with him, and we will return in a few days. You will have time to calm the king down.”

“I will,” I promise. Somehow.

She sighs, leaning against the footboard of the bed. “Tonight is the perfect distraction, just like I told him. Although I wish you’d just spoken to him yourself, as he isn’t in the best of moods, and that’s on you.”

“I haven’t spoken to him since that morning at breakfast, and I don’t know what to say to him at this point,” I admit.

“Hello would be a good start,” she replies.

I narrow my eyes at her. “When you get a mate, you’ll realise that hello is awkward when you don’t know what to say next or how you feel.”

“Mates.” She scrunches her nose. “No, thank you. Having a mate is like cutting your heart in half and letting the other half wander around outside your body for anyone to stab.”

“I know,” I mutter, rubbing my forehead. “I don’t plan to give him space forever... I just need to think. I’m truly not mad at him.”

“Think about what?”

I gnaw on my bottom lip. “That he didn’t tell me. I thought he was the only one in my life not keeping secrets and lying to me. I told him everything, every truth, because I trusted him. I’m feeling foolish, and I didn’t see what was right in front of me. That is my mate, and that draw I had to him from the start wasn’t just lust. I always knew it, deep down, but he never said anything. He let me convince myself that it wasn’t real.”

“You’re not foolish for trusting him,” she replies. “He is an idiot for not telling you, but I think he did it to get to know you, protect you and care for you without you assuming the mating bond was the only reason why he did those things.”

“That’s the thing...was it? Did he stay because of the bond or because of me?”

“Serei, can’t it be both?” she questions, and when I don’t reply, she continues. “If you can’t be with him for any reason, please do not break my brother’s heart further by carrying on this torment for him. I know how you feel about the guard and the king, your other mate, and I know that female wolves are quite used to having more than one mate, but it is not normal for witches. My brother is a ruler, and many look up to him. He can’t have you at his side unless you truly want to be there, because the witches will not make this mating easy. Not when they know about your other mate and lover.”

“I haven’t even begun to think about being the witch lord’s mate. I can only just focus on him being Tarrent, the male I know here, not the male who rules a city I haven’t seen,” I explain, a headache building between my eyes. “As for hurting Tarrent...I wouldn’t ever do that. Whatever decision I come to about him and me, I won’t drag it out.”

“Well, then,” she says, offering me her elbow, “I haven’t been to a ball or party that I’m not a slave at in a long time. We should get out of here. I want wine.”

The idea of any wine churns my stomach after my time with Tarrent. “I’m very glad to be your friend.”

“Me too,” she replies with a coy smile. “Hopefully, soon, you’ll be my sister, and then my poor brother will never escape the strong-willed females in his life.”

I chuckle and smile, really smile, because I never thought about it that way. Devika would become a sister to me. She whispers some words from her lips, and the spell disappears, the magic fading around the room... I think I’ll always admire witch magic just for the sheer usefulness of it. I hook my arm into hers and head to the door, wondering what tonight is going to be like instead of any worry about Nakoa and Tarrent—and what will happen if they get caught. Instead of panicking that the Wolven gods are going to carry out their threat and what is going to happen to all of us because of them, I push it aside for now. There is nothing I can do to fight them off, and telling anyone is just putting them in danger. Tarrent is my last hope, and considering all I know now about being his mate, I trust him to find us a way out of this. When the Wolven gods come for me, I’m going to offer them anything I can to save Dray, to save myself. But tonight is about having fun and hoping that Tarrent is as sneaky as I suspect he can be.

Also, I won’t let Nakoa stay down there if Tarrent fails. Nakoa leaves those dungeons tonight.

The castle has been beautifully decorated over the last few days, and now it’s night, and magic hangs in the air. It takes my breath away. Wreaths of red and silver roses entwine around the edges of the walls, making archways around the doors, and swirling diamonds hang in every doorway we pass through. Orbs of red, orange and yellow flames softly float around the room, always moving like they are in the current of a slow river, and my eyes brighten as I look up at them and we step into the ballroom. I’ve seen this room twice, in passing, and it’s incredible how massive the space is. Gold floors

stretch to pillared walls of soft amber and cream tones, with dragons painted flying around the room. From the ceiling hangs four massive chandeliers with ruby red crystals hanging and catching the light from the orbs, making them sparkle. At the back of the ballroom is a massive orchestra with dragon shifters playing various instruments, all of them very good and the songs new to me.

What shocks me silent is the fact the room is full. Not just dragons, but wolf and human scents too, and many, many females. The middle of the room is full of dancers, their dresses all different shades, and my legs near enough go out from under me as I spot my mama. She is dancing with a male I haven't met, and they are swirling fast to the music, her dark green dress swinging around.

"Is that your mother?" Devika quietly questions as we walk further into the room.

I nod, my lips dry as I search the other dancers here. Most of the females are wolves or angels, from their scents, and one wolf with scars across her face dances with an angel with light wings, both of them lost with each other. I think she is Breelyn, from my mum's stories of her omega who fell in love with her best friend, the first angel beta of Fall Mountain Pack.

People walk past me, and I'm so frozen in sheer shock that I don't even notice two male dragon shifters stop in front of me. I don't know their names, and they both bow before focusing on Devika.

"Would you do me the deep honour of a dance?"

Devika looks at the male shifter from head to toe before giving him an indifferent glance. "I'd rather die."

She abandons me to the shifters, walking straight past them and towards where it scents like wine. "Devika," I hiss.

"Would you like to dance?" the male asks, turning his attention to me. "The king is not here, so I'm sure he would not mind if—"

"The queen dances with the king tonight. Move."

A deep voice interrupts, and they part for Dray to walk between them and right up to me, leaving little space between us. He's wearing a black suit with gold thread on the trim and a gold rose resting in his blazer pocket, and he looks so handsome I can't breathe. His gold eyes flicker down me, like a lover's caress, and when he finally looks up, all I can focus on is the heat pooling in my lower stomach from the look alone. A cold crown rests on the top of his head, ruby red gemstones pressed into the metal, and it almost glows in the flame light.

He offers me his hand. "May I have this dance?"

I feel completely in a trance as I take his hand and let him lead me across the room and into the dancers. I stare up into his eyes, unable to look away. "Did you invite my mama and her mate here? And the others from the pack?"

"Yes," he replies, keeping his eyes on mine. "I never wanted to lock you away from your family, Serei, but I had no choice. I was cursed to sleep, unable to protect you, and the only protection left lay within this city. Letting you out or them in before now risked many of my enemies finding you."

"The ones you stole the power from or Arawn?" I question. I wonder if he will tell me who he stole them off yet. These Wolven gods who want him dead, and will punish us all for refusing unless Tarrent and I figure something out.

"Yes," he responds before twirling me around and bringing me back to him, his arms wrapped tight around my chest as my back stays on his. "Enjoy tonight, Serei. I...I am tired of us fighting all of the time."

"Will you let Nakoa out, then?" I push.

He spins me back around and pulls me back to him, all in time with the music, and I'm a little dizzy as he holds me. "No. Nakoa can take his punishment until I feel he has learnt how to be loyal."

I sigh and rest my head on his chest. He is going to be so angry tomorrow. For now, I drop the subject, as he isn't going

to budge and there is no point. “Thank you for letting my family here.”

“I want to see you happy,” he replies. I’ve never danced much in my life, but when I’m dancing with him, it feels like I’ve danced with him forever as he leads me around the room. We don’t say too much more, and I get the impression he is content to hold me, just as I am content to be with him.

The song finishes, and he lets me go to bow his head. I bow my head too, smiling. “I enjoyed that more than—”

Tarrent steps up next to Dray, and he holds out his hand to me. I eye the brave witch lord in his deep blue tuxedo, and by the fires, he is striking. Power spreads off his built body, and Dray standing next to him makes them both look so powerful it’s overwhelming. They look night and day, gold and black, and completely at war with each other. “May I have the next dance?”

The question lingers between us, and Tarrent looks at Dray, who glares at him. They stare each other down, the room getting tenser by the second, and I’m about to say no just to save an argument when Dray turns to me. “If my queen wishes. I will leave you.”

Dray walks away, and something about it hurts my heart, and I can’t look away from his retreating form until he is swallowed up by the dancers.

Tarrent is still holding out his hand, the music swiftly changing into the new song, and I take his hand without second-guessing myself. His warm palm presses tightly into mine as he pulls me to him, leaving no space at all between our bodies, and I nearly yelp. He swiftly moves us to the music, taking complete control as Dray did, but it’s different with Tarrent. Neither of us say anything for what feels like a long time, but it isn’t.

“He won’t walk away completely, if that is what you’re worried about,” Tarrent gruffly says.

I swallow. “I’m messing all of this up, aren’t I?”

“Never,” Tarrent vows. “The king needs time to accept the mating bond between us, much like you do.”

“I still think he wants to kill you,” I reply.

“It would certainly be an interesting fight, though I do not know if he would win, nor would I, because we’d both hurt you,” he responds. “That’s why it hasn’t gone that far.”

“Thank you,” I softly say. “For tonight.”

I don’t say exactly what, in fear of someone hearing us, but he knows. He picks me up by my waist, spinning me around, and I smile against his cheek before he lowers me once more. The tempo of the music gets faster, and I feel dizzy as Tarrent effortlessly keeps us moving to the beat. Soon there is just us, dancing fast and perfectly, our bodies in tune with each other, and I can’t break eye contact with him at all.

The song ends and I’m near breathless as we both stop, and he takes a step back and bows. “My queen.”

I bow back. “What happened to calling me princess?”

He chuckles, his eyes sparkling like light hitting the ocean water. “Tonight, you’re definitely the queen.”

“Is this Tarrent, the witch I’ve heard about?” my mama asks, coming up behind me. I spin around, and she pulls me into a hug.

The male at her side looks kind, and after taking in his dark hair and blue eyes, I smile at him. “Henderson?”

“Correct,” he answers. “Serendipity. It is good to see you. Valentine hasn’t stopped gloating about how he has seen you first and how he is your favourite of us all.”

“You can tell him I’ve changed my mind,” I say with a grin. A warm hand rests on my lower back, and I look up at Tarrent. “This is Tarrent Bloodsong, witch lord, which is sort of like a king to the witches.”

“Where were the witches when the world fell and burnt?” Henderson questions. “When many asked for help.”

“Hiding with my father, who is now dead,” Tarrent flatly answers, the two of them staring each other down. “Pleasure to meet you both.”

Mama and I look between the two males, and she hooks her arm in mine. “How about we find some of your other friends I’d like to meet?”

“Sure,” I say, and before I can ask Tarrent if he wants to come, my mum leads me away from them. After we get away from the dancers and near a small table at the side, Mama sighs. “They will be fine. Henderson is protective, and he wants to know much about the witch lord.”

“He is my mate,” I tell her.

Her eyes widen. “Two mates? Wow.”

“You’re telling me,” I say. “I’m so happy to see you here.”

“As am I,” she replies, touching my arm.

“May I speak with you alone, Serendipity?”

I turn and look at Sallette as she stands in front of me and Mama, and I wish she wasn’t here, using her sweet tone and all. She looks incredible, but it’s nothing I don’t expect. She’s wearing a silver ball gown, and it really does suit her. The top half is nothing but feathers all the way around her waist and chest before falling into long, trailing skirts. Her long black hair is up in a tight bun on her head, with several beautiful silver butterfly clips resting on the side of the bun, glittering in the light.

“Mama, this is Sallette, and, Sallette, this is Queen Mairin,” I introduce them, my voice tense, and I find my mama watches Sallette carefully. “Anything you need to say can be said here.”

“Fine,” she huffs, closing her hands together in front of her. “I wanted to apologise to you. From the day we met, I tried to take what is yours, and I owe you an explanation why. I came back to this city unaware that Draycian had a mate, and truthfully, I still had many feelings for him. I loved him, like I did when we were once together. It was wrong of me, and I do not wish to come between you two when there is nothing

between me and Draycian anymore. I simply want to apologise for any trouble I may have caused, and I will be finding myself a new home with my own kind soon.”

I stay silent, my teeth pressed together because I don't believe her. Even if her tone is as sweet as candy, her doe eyes bigger than the sun, and her body language screaming passiveness, it's not real. It's my mama who takes a step forward. “In my lands, if someone went after my mate, they'd find themselves challenged. I do not believe you are sorry in the slightest, and I suggest you get out of here before I take your presence personally.”

“This is between Serendipity and me,” she all but sneers, and I smile. There is the real witch I could sense deep down. She isn't sweet-natured and it's all been a pretence.

“Get out,” I snap at her. “I don't believe your lies either.”

She looks between us and curls her lip. “Enjoy tonight, Serendipity. I will leave the city immediately. I wouldn't want to upset the new queen.”

It sounds like a threat, and I watch her until she has walked out of the room, and I finally relax my shoulders. Mama looks at me. “She will stab you in the back the second she can. I know females like that, and they don't change.”

“She went after Dray when he found out about Tarrent and the mate bond. She knew he would be upset,” I quietly tell her. “And no one good does that. She doesn't care about him.”

“That we agree on,” she replies. “I saw your king leaving in a foul mood, and I'm wondering why you're here speaking with me when you could be with him. He needs you.”

“Will you make sure Henderson doesn't destroy my—I mean, Tarrent?” I ask, stumbling over my words. I was about to call him my mate... By the fires, I'm all over the place.

She nods with an amused smile. “I promise. Have a good night, my darling girl.”

I kiss her cheek before picking up the sides of my skirts and leaving the room, dodging any males that come my way to stop me, presumably to ask for a dance. The castle feels alive

in a way I've never seen it, and all the scents make it hard to pick up on Draycian's scent. I close my eyes, and instead of focusing on his scent, I touch that flame I feel when I think of Dray or call on our power, and I walk towards the deep, never-ending tug. The corridors blur into one, until I hear new music being played in the distance, and I follow the lulling sound, pausing outside a pair of closed blue doors. I push them open, pausing when I find Dray sitting at a piano, his fingers expertly playing the keys. If he notices I'm here, he doesn't pause, and I step in, closing the door behind me and resting my back against it. I stay still, listening to the song until it finishes, and only then do I hear my heart racing.

"You look so beautiful tonight, Serei," Draycian breathes out, finally looking my way. "I have met gods and goddesses, seen the impossible beauty they have created, and yet you are the only sight I can never stop staring at."

The compliment rolls across my skin, settling into my bones, and I'm speechless. He rises from the piano and walks to me, his eyes locked onto mine. When he stops, his scent wraps around me as he leans on the door, his fists pressing into the wood, and it groans under the pressure. "You're my sweetest torture and my deepest desire."

"Dray," I whisper, placing my hand on his chest over his racing heart. "I'm not leaving, and you were right. I'm yours. I have been for a long time, but admitting it always felt like I was losing my independence, my choice in my fate, until recently. Until you saved me. I realised that losing you from my life would be the only way I'd lose anything. We can work the rest out along the way, annoying each other bit by bit until one of us caves."

"That will be you," he replies, toying with me. "Never I."

He leans down, but I press my fingers to his lips, not letting him kiss me, because if he does, then I will lose any bit of strength I have in this room with him. I need to say this. "I won't give up Tarrent or Nako. If you want me, then you need to accept all of me, and that includes my love for them, the parts of my soul I share with them, like I do with you."

He stays still, unnaturally so, watching me. I expect anything but his answer, his voice low and hushed. “I’ve never been good at sharing, but for you...for you, I will do anything. When the witch asked for your hand to dance, I knew it was true. I’d do anything for you.”

The breath I didn’t know I was holding whooshes out of me. I remove my hand, and he takes the cue to finally kiss me. His lips press hard onto mine, prying my lips apart within seconds, and I don’t want him to ever stop. A masculine, satisfied groan leaves his throat as he picks me up and opens the door, carrying me down the corridors. I don’t notice anyone or anything but his lips on mine as he devours me until we get to our room, and he lowers me onto his bed. The room is dimly lit, the only light shining in from the window, and I look at him as he kneels between my legs on the bed.

“This means you’re mine forever, Serendipity Fall. Is this what you wish?”

I lie back, looking up at him the entire time. “Yes. I’m yours, Draycian of the house of Mnemosyne. My king. My mate.”

His eyes turn into golden flames as he grins. “My queen, I have waited long for this, and I have had many, many ideas on exactly what I want to do to you.”

“Oh?”

“Oh indeed,” he hums, running his thumb across his bottom lip. Flames spark up in the air around us, and he places his hand on my stomach. I gasp as fire spreads across my dress, burning it off my body until there is nothing between his hand and the soft skin of my stomach. His touch feels hotter than any fire in this world. His gaze slowly runs over me, followed by his hand, and I stay still as he cups one of my breasts in his hand. It fits perfectly. His thumb rubs across my hard nipple, and a moan builds in the back of my throat. “I want to know what you like, how you like it, and then I’m going to fuck you until there is only us.”

By the fires. I feel so unprepared for Dray. I always have done, and he has centuries of experience on me. I’ve only ever

come with Tarrent before, and other than kisses, this is new to me. I want this with him, and I hope he doesn't hate my inexperience.

His hand leaves my breast and flattens as he slowly slides down to my core, and he lowers his head of golden hair. He roughly parts my legs, gripping my thighs with his large hands, and he presses one soft kiss on the inside of my thigh, which makes my whole body feel like it's on fire. He does that to me, Dray, and always has done. One touch, one kiss... I can't even imagine what it will be like to have him inside me. "Can I touch you? Can I claim you as my mate?"

"Yes," I breathe out, wishing I didn't sound like I was begging him at this point. He chuckles deeply, the sound so sexy it's painful.

He kisses my other thigh softly, and I lower my hand to cover his on my thigh. He leans down, his face inches from my core, before looking up at me. "Watch me."

My mouth goes dry, but I do as my king demands as he runs his hands down my thighs, to my core, and parts my lips. The first stroke of his hot tongue makes me cry in pleasure, and I throw my head back, unable to do anything else. He doesn't relent, swirling and sucking on my clit, and I can't contain the sounds escaping my throat. Just as I'm about to come, he moves away from my clit, and I look down, finding his eyes on me. His eyes are burning with lust, and yet he looks content. His thumb rolls once across my clit before stopping, and I narrow my eyes at him. I'm right there, so close, and he isn't letting me. "I told you to watch, my queen."

I sit up and move down the bed. He runs his finger across my bottom lip, a low growl building in his throat. I lean between us and stroke his hard cock through his trousers. He hisses and tightens his grip on my hips.

"Teach me what you like," I softly say, my cheeks burning. "And then I will let you have me."

He growls and picks me up, pushing me back on the bed and covering me with his body. He kisses me, forcing me to taste myself on his lips and tongue, before rolling to my side. I

silently watch as he unclips his belt and pushes down his trousers. His shirt goes next, leaving him gloriously naked next to me, and I don't know where to look first. I run my eyes over his bare chest, the ripple of the muscles and his flat stomach and toned abs. He is so beautiful. He is a god, but sometimes, I don't see it until moments like this...when I feel so mortal. His cock is thick, long and wet on the tip as I reach between us. He is still as I run my fingertip over the slit of his cock and wrap my fingers around his thick length. I can't reach all the way around, but as I slide my hand down his cock and back up, the groan Dray makes tells me he likes it. I stroke him a few more times, and he watches me, his eyes blazing. "You don't need any instruction, Serei. Every time you touch me, I could come from that alone. You are perfect."

His praise washes away any doubts about myself I had, and I stroke him faster, watching how he loses control in a matter of moments, and there is nothing but pure male need in his eyes as he looks at me.

And he snaps.

He takes my hand off his cock and climbs on top of me, pushing my legs apart. I widen my legs for him, and he grips my ass with one of his hands as he slowly pushes the tip of his cock into me and pauses. He looks down at me, our lips inches apart. "My mate. Tell me you're mine."

I lean up and kiss him, whispering against his lips. "I've always been yours."

He thrusts into me, and I cry out, a sharp pinch of pain soon swallowed by blinding pleasure. He is so big, and it's an adjustment for a few seconds. Dray groans against my lips, parting them and deepening our kiss. I feel so full, so close to the edge, and I know it's not going to take much for Dray to push me into overwhelming pleasure. Dray slowly pulls out before thrusting back in to the hilt, squeezing my ass tightly. "Fuck...there is nothing like you."

"Don't stop," I plead. "Draycian, by the fires!"

He slams into me harder, and I'm so close. He reaches between us, his fingers rolling across my clit, and that's all it

takes. Burning hot fires flash across my eyes as I tighten around him, my moans swallowed by his mouth as he gets harder inside me, riding out my orgasm before he stills. I feel his hot come fill me, and it feels even more intense until we both breathlessly stare at each other. He kisses me softly, still inside me, and I look up into his eyes.

He nuzzles into my neck, and I tighten my hold on him. “My mate,” he whispers.

“Always,” I whisper back. He pulls out of me and tugs me to his side. He reaches between us, touching my core, which is sore, and his seed is pouring out of me. I gasp when he strokes his finger down my slit before pushing his finger into me and back out. “I don’t want any of me to escape you.”

My whole body flushes, and I move to lie on his chest, wondering why we bothered spending all this time arguing when we could have been doing this instead. This is so much better. “I have to tell you something,” he says.

“Right now?” I question, lifting my head. “I thought we could repeat—”

His eyes fill with heat. “We will, but I don’t wish to start our mating with any secrets. I’ve learnt of a prophecy. It says there will be a new goddess, and she will be strong enough to kill even the Wolven gods. We must find her tomorrow, when everything has settled.”

“No secrets?” I whisper. The Wolven gods...the secret I have weighing down on me, but I can’t tell him. I just can’t. The Wolven gods would know, and I need every day I can get.

He searches my eyes before kissing me on my forehead. “Tomorrow, we discuss everything, my mate, but tonight I want to explore your body and soul. Tonight, they are mine.”

As he pushes me on my back, kissing me deeply, I wonder if he knows my body and soul have always belonged to him.

Forty-One



DRAGONS' roars wake me up from my deep slumber, and I flinch at the noise and the vibration of the walls around us. Dray sits up with a jolt, his eyes glowing gold in the darkness, and we both climb off the bed in a hurry. Dray grabs his clothes as I pull the curtains open, clutching the sheets to my chest. "Is someone drunk and flying around out there?"

But as I fully look out into the city, I know it's not that. Something is very, very wrong. In the distance, five dragon shifters fly past and towards the edge of the city, where I can see blurry creatures crawling up on the towering buildings. I stumble back when I get a good look at some of them, and even the distance and darkness don't hide the giant black wolf-like creature as it gets to the top of a building and tears the wings off a dragon shifter, his cry echoing to my ears. Sickness crawls up my throat, and my voice breaks. "Arawn is here. These are his creatures."

"Can you sense if he is here yet?" Draycian gruffly questions, coming to my side and pulling me to him. "Stay away from the window, sweetheart. I will deal with this."

"I can't sense him yet," I say, clutching to his black shirt he has pulled on. Screams echo around the city, all the way to us, and I look at Dray. "You need to leave me and go save them. I'll follow you."

"No," he bites out. "Leaving you alone is exactly what Arawn will want."

I look back at our city, our people screaming and dying. In the moonlight, the creatures look like a dark black cloud swarming on the city, and there are hundreds, if not thousands, of them jumping on every building and ripping shifters out of their beds. Females' screams linger in the air, and I realise some of the wolf shifters invited into the city last night stayed in the city with our people. By the fires, this is going to be a massacre.

“Dray, you're their king and they need you. I will use my powers to portal out if he comes for me,” I say, pushing against his hard chest.

He sinks his fingers into my hair and kisses me deeply, swiftly, before letting go. “Stay in this room, Serei. Please listen to me just this once. There are wards on our room that will take him some time to get through.”

“Okay,” I agree, rubbing my arms. Tarrent and Devika would have gotten Nakoa out hours ago, and he will be long gone, and Reine left with my mama to return to the pack lands. I hope.

“Be safe,” he grumbles, his eyes flashing with fury as his body swiftly changes. His gold wings spread out of his back, his horns stretch up, and scales litter his skin. His tone is darker, deeper and dangerous. “Kill anyone or anything that threatens you. Don't pause, and burn them.”

I nod, and he turns, leaving the room. I swear the castle floor shakes with his power, with the knowledge the king is here. My heart races as I watch him walk out, wishing I told him I loved him one more time before letting him go out there to fight. He is a god, he can fight better than anyone else in this city, and he is right, staying in this room is the only safe place for me. A female scream echoes nearby, followed by the sound of crashing, and the castle shakes, knocking me over. Sophie. That was Sophie's scream. How did I forget her? I look at the door and pause for a second. I should stay here... but Sophie can't fight, and I promised to protect her.

A queen doesn't stay in her room when her friends need her.

I hope Dray can see it that way. I pull on the nearest clothes, black leggings and a black shirt, which I'm sure is Dray's since it is falling to my knees. I grab my glowing daggers, both of them, and kick my bedroom door down before walking out. Smoke lines the ceiling of the corridor, flower petals burning on the floor, and I don't have time to think about it as I search for Sophie. I know where her room is, and it's not far from here. I head around the corridor, keeping my senses open, and luckily there is no one to pass, no guards or shifters. Everyone is fighting outside. More screams echo in the distance as the smell of burning fire gets stronger, and I try to block out the noise as I slip around the last corridor. Her door is wedged open, smoke coming from inside, and I rush over, pushing the door open further and pausing at the mess of her room. The ceiling is open, at least two floors above visible, and furniture is hanging off the edges and on fire. From her scent alone, I'd guess she is in the room somewhere, and when I focus, I can hear her racing heart.

“SOPHIE!”

I pause when I realise the collapsed bed has a creature right in the middle of it, the curtains blocking my view for a second too long. It roars and jumps at me, and I barely manage to jump out of the way as it crashes into the corridor, slamming through the wall and into another room. I stand up and put my back to the room, hoping Sophie is still alive. The dust creates a cloud around the creature as it rises, spikes on its neck flashing in the dim light. Its skin is black and velvety and smothered in scars. Its eyes are like a cat's, bright yellow and glowing in the darkness, and this creature has small velvet wings on its back, even when it is the size of an adult bear; the wings can't let it fly long with how small they are. It bares its teeth like a wolf, and I growl right back.

“You aren't the only one with claws,” I taunt over my racing heart, speaking far more confidently than I am feeling. I'm Serendipity Fall, and I come from a line of wolves with fire in our hearts. We do not bow, we do not fall...we fight. The creature's claws dig into the stone right before it jumps and runs at me, quickly swallowing the space between us. Swirling fire pours out of my body, twisting around my arms,

and my hair lifts off my neck as I let the fire burn down my daggers, the glow of them changing to red. I run and jump at it, meeting it halfway in the corridor, and I twist aside, just avoiding its snapping teeth. I slam my daggers into its neck, drawing all the way down to its stomach, hot black blood pouring over my skin and burning like acid fire. The daggers cut deep and easy, and the acid smell is horrible as I slide to a stop. The creature screeches as it falls and rolls before turning its head back to me and rising back up.

Fucking die already.

I lift my daggers and brace myself for it. For a second, I swear I hear Dray's voice in my head. *"I don't need weapons when I can make them."*

I look at my dagger, still glowing red, and I open my hands, letting them both drop to the floor. My hands shake as I raise them in the air, and my wolf growls in my head as I dig deep into the flame in my chest, in my soul, and pull. Scorching fire pours out my fingertips and, like lances, they shoot across the corridor and engulf the creature within seconds. The creature shrieks and collapses in the fire, making awful sounds that no creature should ever make, as it slowly dies. I swallow the disgust crawling up my throat, lowering my hands and gagging on the awful smell coming off it as it burns. I pick up my daggers and shove them into one hand before going back into the room. "Sophie! The creature is gone. You can come out now, it's just me."

No one answers me, but I can still sense her in here, and I search in the darkness, the smoke getting thicker in the air. It might not hurt me, but Sophie is half human, and she isn't fireproof. My feet knock into something, and I look down, my throat closing when I see an arm, and I only breathe when I realise it's a muscular arm. A male arm. I can't see who it is, but he scents like a dragon, and I bet it was whoever was guarding Sophie today. I quickly take his pulse and confirm what I suspected, he's gone. I step over him towards the bed and use the post to swing myself over a pile of rubble, wondering if Sophie is trapped somewhere under all of this, just as I see her. Sophie is in the corner of the room, and she

has got her arms wrapped around her knees, rocking back and forth in her cream ball gown. I wonder why she didn't take it off to sleep or whether she simply wanted to keep it on forever. To treasure tonight...until it went all wrong.

"Sophie," I softly say with a relieved sigh, climbing over the bricks and stone to get to her. She doesn't look up until I fall to my knees in front of her and touch her arm. "We have to go. My room is safe, warded, and we can make it there. Come with me. I'll protect you."

She looks up, her cheeks lined with tears and dust. Even through it all, and the blood marking her dress that smells like the dead dragon nearby, she is so pretty. And so scared. "Promise?"

"I promise," I say, picking her up by the arm. She lets me help her through the rubble of the room, and her eyes linger on the dead dragon shifter by the door.

"He's dead and there are monsters in the city. They killed him and..." she mutters after seeing the dead shifter, and I figure she is in shock as I try to calm her down and lead her out of the room.

"It's okay, Sophie. I'm not going to let you die in here," I tell her. "You fought way too much to die here. Remember, you're a survivor."

She doesn't answer me, still muttering to herself about monsters and shaking from head to toe. I guess I'm lucky she's not passed out yet. I lead her back into the corridor, and a cry escapes her lips as she takes in the burning creature. "Shh, there might be others. You need to be quiet."

That has her going silent, a small mercy. We stay close to the wall to get around it, and I keep on high alert, counting the moments until I get us back to my room. The smoke is so much thicker, and it makes it hard to see where I'm going. Sophie is coughing on it, and I realise it's worse the closer we get to my room. We can't go there. Dammit.

Knowing I don't have a choice, I change direction to the throne room, and the moment I step out into it, a familiar sense

barrels into me.

I stop mid-step and turn, my heart going still as I look at Arawn. He stands in the middle of the throne room, two massive creatures at his back and his hands resting together. A long black cloak falls off his shoulders, matching his hair, which is shaved short.

“Ah, there is my old friend.”

I narrow my eyes at him, carefully pushing Sophie behind me. He smiles at me like he planned all of this, because of course he did. Only Arawn would choose this night to attack, a night in celebration of the goddess that created him. The one he heartlessly killed so many years ago. I glance over my shoulder at Sophie, who is already taking a step back. “Stay by the wall.”

She doesn't reply, and I have to turn back to Arawn as I move my daggers into both my hands. “You're not welcome in here, Arawn. Get the fuck out of my city and take your creatures with you.”

He lowers his hands. “Or what, Queen Serendipity?”

I smile. “You made me a queen. Why don't you find out?”

He laughs low. “Did the king's cock fill you with confidence as well as his seed? I don't remember you being so...determined before.”

I flush and brush off his comment. “You're not leaving here alive, Arawn.”

“I can scent him all over you, queen.” His lip curls in disgust. “But it's time for us to go and leave your mate behind to die with his precious shifters. The Vanir will fall tonight, and we shall rise.”

“We?” I laugh, stepping closer. “Are you still delusional enough to think I will ever go with you?”

“Oh, I plan to make you,” he coos, right before disappearing, leaving nothing but black embers floating in the air. I blink, and fear lances into my heart when I hear Sophie's scream.

As I turn, I know what I'm going to see, and I can't prepare myself for it. Sophie's eyes are wider than I've ever seen, Arawn's tanned hand pressed over her mouth, and he is holding a sword to her neck.

He holds her against his chest, and she looks so small, so tiny and so helpless. Sophie. I tighten my hands on my daggers. "Let her go."

"Humans are not friends, even this one," he taunts, lowering his head and smelling her hair. "I can scent how many males have fucked her, and yet, she is still weak and useless. This one is weak."

"She isn't weak!" I say, my mouth dry as I take a step forward. Sophie cries out. "Let her go."

"Offer me something in return then," he replies with a cruel smile. "Perhaps what Draycian recently had, by the smell of you."

Disgust curls in my stomach, and he must read it on my face as he sighs. Nothing and no one can stop him as he plunges his sword into her neck and pulls it back out. She doesn't cry out; she doesn't seem to move for a second as Arawn lets her go and steps back. The world pauses as I look at my friend, the kindest and sweetest person I've ever met, as she dies, and she smiles right before blood pours from her lips and her body slumps forward onto the floor.

"Don't look so heartbroken, my young friend. She was human and would die before you," he replies, stepping over her body and kicking her in the process. I can't hear anything over the roar of my heart in my ears, and I can't move my eyes off her body as I feel numb. A roar echoes outside the castle, one I know well, and I snap out of it to look at Arawn. I push the grief and shock down and focus on the burning anger building in my chest. I point one of my daggers at Arawn. "When you die, the fires will burn you for an eternity for what you just took. She didn't deserve that."

"Life is not fair," he blandly says, crossing his arms. His bloody sword still rests in his hand. "I told you this before. When I was your only friend."

His tone is mocking, and before I can reply, suddenly a sphere flies across the room, right past my arm and into Arawn's chest. He goes flying across the throne room in an explosion of flames, and I look back in wide eyes as Dray storms into the room, his entire focus on our enemy. "Get the fuck away from my mate."

Black blood pours off his golden wings and clothes, horns tipped into the air and his fangs stretching out of his upper lip as he roars, shaking the surrounding ground.

Arawn laughs, standing up out of the golden flames surrounding him. "Draycian, I was just congratulating your mate on making the mating final."

Dray is past pretty words, and he grabs Arawn, slamming his fist into his cheek. Arawn's head snaps to the side, and Dray throws him into the wall.

"You're dead."

I like Dray's pretty threats much better than Arawn's. Arawn draws his sword as Dray gets closer, and Dray lifts his hands, two swords made of gold flames appearing in his hands. He attacks first, and Arawn easily fights him off. Two immortal gods, both trained together, and it's come to this. Ripping my eyes from the fight, I crawl over to Sophie and pull her onto her back, my throat clogged with emotion as tears fall down my cheeks. "Oh, Sophie."

I promised to protect her...and I failed. She is dead because of me. The beautiful, innocent girl who escaped a terrible life has died for nothing and no one. I close her wide eyes that look so empty, and lift her hands, placing them on her chest. Her blood pours around her, sinking into my leggings, and I keep my hands on hers. She is still warm, and I hope some part of her soul is still here and not in the fires yet.

"We endure the fall and rise in the ashes," I repeat the words of my pack, for the half of her that is wolf, and for the human half, I claim that side for myself. My voice is hoarse, and for a moment, the fighting all fades away. "May the fires bless your passage and send you home. We will dance in the flames again."

I let my fire pour out of my body, every inch of me, into hers until she is nothing but pure, burning flames and ash. Only then do I stand up, wiping my cheeks and looking for my mate. Arawn and Dray are locked together in a fight, neither of them using their true power, and I realise it's personal. Dray is better, I soon notice, and as the floor shakes around us, Dray manages to knock Arawn's sword out of his hand. The tip of Dray's sword presses against Arawn's neck within a second. "I should have killed you when I locked you away. You had to go after my mate, didn't you?"

"Don't you want to know what I did to Sallette for all those years?" he toys with a smirk. "She enjoyed it."

Dray growls low and my feet feel frozen. Arawn is winding him up, hoping that he will get so angry that he won't fight well. Dray has to see that, right? "What do you know of the prophecy, and who is it that will kill the Wolven gods as it suggests?"

Arawn's smile is nothing but smug. "Ah, so you've found the book I wrote. I wondered if anyone would dig it up from that prison."

"Tell me," Dray demands, pressing the sword closer. "Or I will end you."

Arawn laughs. "Do you really believe a sword can kill me?"

Dray tilts his head to the side and goes still in that unnatural way he does. "I believe cutting you up, slowly, and burning every tiny part of you will do the job. If not, I'll repeat the process until it does."

For a moment, Arawn loses the cocky, smug smirk, and fear flickers in his eyes. "Have it your way."

Arawn disappears into a haze of black flames, which spread into a swirling, fast, and terrifying sphere. Two black wings spread out of the flames, followed by the long mouth of a black scarred dragon, and finally the flames vanish. Arawn's dragon is as big as Draycian's when he is shifted, and it turns its gaze to me. Its eyes are black, empty sockets, and it jumps

for me. A gold dragon, the same size as it, crashes into its side, and my heart screams for my mate. Draycian's and Arawn's dragons crash through the castle and into the city, and the dust blows me over. I cover my head from the falling stone, one of them hitting my back, and I cry out from the smack, hearing my ribs break and feeling it. The pain distracts me for a second as I struggle to breathe and crawl to my feet as the dust begins to settle, and soft silver moonlight shines down on me.

They didn't just break the castle...they broke the mountain. The gold and black dragons fight in the middle of the air, above the crater-sized gap in the mountain. Parts of the rocks are still falling, revealing more of the hidden city by the second, but I can't look away from my mate and Arawn, both of them smacking into each other, biting and spraying fire that falls in tiny flames on the city.

Dray... I feel for him, down our mating bond, and wish we had more time to build the ability to speak into each other's minds. But I can feel him, and he needs my help. Dray roars in pain, and I look up to see Arawn biting his wing, both of them falling right down in the air towards me. Last minute, Dray kicks Arawn off and spreads out his wings, gliding up and away from the city. Maybe he can win this and finally kill Arawn. The thought barely crosses my mind before three creatures with massive black wings fly into the fight and go for Draycian, outnumbering him four to one. His dragon fights hard, but he needs help, even as he tears into one of the creatures and its body falls into the city.

If I can distract the creatures and draw them into the city, to me, then Dray will be able to deal with Arawn. I need... wings.

Without second-guessing it, I pull from the fire within me, and when I open my eyes, wings of flames push out of my back and flicker in the air. I run my fingers through the flames and look up. I'm a fire queen...and my mate needs me. My feet leave the floor as I flap my wings and fly into the air. My chest lurches as I fly higher, my body knowing where I want to go even if I'm regretting this. It's a long way down. I only

have to look up at Dray, struggling to fight them all off, and I know I can do this.

I fly up in the air, letting my flames spread down the daggers in my hands, and I stop midair, not far from them. I lift my daggers, and fire shoots out of the tips and lances through the air to the two creatures. They scream as my flames hit them, burning their sides, and they turn to me. Dray rips into the neck of one of the creatures before flinging it aside, and the last one sprints towards me, the distraction. My heart near stops when an even bigger creature flies out of a dark corner of the city and sprints for me.

Dray doesn't see me, not as he goes for Arawn and snaps at his neck. I turn around and fly into the city, looking around for somewhere to draw them into. So much of the city is in flames or destroyed, and eventually I look at the training grounds. I roll to a stop, my wings flickering out, and I turn around to brace myself for the creatures. One of them lands first, the ground vibrating with the weight of the land, and it screeches at me. All I see is the flash of a gold sword and flames flickering around a male form, and the creature's head falls onto the ground. The second creature stops midair, floating almost, and suddenly it explodes into black dust that falls around the training fields. I look over as Nakoa walks around the dragon's head, a gold sword in his hand and black blood on his clothes. A cry echoes in my throat as I run to him, and he grabs me, holding me to his chest. "Nothing like a bit of training in the night."

I half laugh and cry, clutching him tightly as he puts me down.

Tarrent walks to our side, and I smile in relief that he is okay. He looks up at the dragons fighting, and I follow his gaze. Arawn is struggling as Draycian hits him again and again with fire and claws, pushing him into the mountain.

"I'm taking you away from this. Are you coming, Nakoa?"

"No," Nakoa states, looking at the city and down at me. "I will stay and help."

“I can stay,” I whisper, but truthfully, I feel weak from using all the fire magic, and my ribs are burning from the falling bricks that hit my back. I don’t know how much use I will be.

Tarrent wraps his arm around me and nods at Nakoa. Both of them are already in agreement, and I take Nakoa’s hand. “Be careful and come back to me.”

Nakoa leans forward and kisses me softly before leaning back and nodding to Tarrent, who doesn’t pause as he lets the shadows and light take me away from my destroyed home.

Forty-Two



CLUTCHING ONTO TARRANT'S CLOAK,

the world spins from darkness and shadow, into bursts of tinted light, until I breathe cold air into my lungs as I gasp. Wet, almost frosted grass is under my bare feet, and I look up at the skies above, the bright twinkling stars, as I feel for my power. It's like an empty well inside me, no sparks or anything, and I know if I kept fighting, then I would have collapsed. I don't think I've ever felt this weak before. I wonder if it's because Dray needs all the power we share, but it feels like there is nothing left. By the fires, I don't even know how I would stand without Tarrent. His warm body is pressed against mine, his arms around my waist, and I relax in his arms for a moment, feeling safer than I have for a few hours. "Sophie is dead...my home is on fire and destroyed... Sophie. I've been so mean to you, ignoring you and pushing you away because of the mate bond, and I shouldn't have. You saved Nakoa for me, you've always been there since we met, and then you saved me once again. I'm a mess, Tarrent. By the fires, I'm a mess. The fear of what the Wolven gods are going to do, in less than two days, has made me foolish."

"Shhh," Tarrent soothes. "You're safe now. I'm sorry about your friend, and as for us, we have a long time ahead of us to discuss it all. You're young and pressured by immortal gods to kill your mate. Fuck, I'd make bad decisions too if I were you."

“She didn’t deserve that ending,” I whisper on a sob, my hot tears falling onto his black cloak, unable to get Sophie out of my head. Her death is replaying in front of my eyes over and over.

I look over as two wolf shifters in full black clothing rush out into the small garden we are in. They have the Fall Mountain Pack symbol in silver on clips on their shoulders, attached to black cloaks, and they immediately draw their swords.

Tarrent whispers a few words, magic lingering in the air, and they both drop to the floor as I step away from him. “Where are we?”

“It’s too far to travel back to my city with you and without other witches on the other side helping with the spell. I left suddenly with Nakoa and Devika. I left without a word of why when I felt...” He pauses.

“What did you feel?”

“Through our bond, I pick up on your fear at times,” he explains. “And other strong emotions.”

I clear my throat and swiftly change the subject away from that bit of news. For now. “So, where are we then?”

“We are in your mother’s pack. I don’t know it well, but I believe this is their residence.”

“Oh,” I whisper, looking around. The garden is outside, and all I can hear is the sound of running water. “I can’t remember being here. It was a long time ago.”

“Then maybe I shouldn’t have knocked out the guards,” Tarrent says with a sigh.

“Maybe,” I deadpan.

He takes my hand, and I squeeze it tight. “Thank you for coming for me.”

“Always,” he quickly replies. “We can talk about it later. I want to get back to the city and make sure Devika and Nakoa are fine. And get rid of any more of those creatures.”

“Dray will handle Arawn,” I say, and my voice is full of hope. I didn’t want to leave him there, but I don’t know how much use I can be in a dragon fight. “He has to.”

Tarrent doesn’t answer, and I hope it’s because he believes the same too. “We should find my mama and her mates. The alphas can send help.”

“Alright,” Tarrent agrees. “My witches will take too long to amass and come to fight.”

I nod, and we walk past the slumped guards and into the castle before Tarrent stops. He looks down at me. “My sister needs me. I can sense it.”

“Go,” I demand. “She is my best friend, and I can deal with my family alone.”

He searches my eyes, and I lean into him for a moment, breathing in his scent. “Learning you’re my mate was like my heart getting the answer I was searching for,” I confess.

“Meeting you was finding my heart, Serendipity Fall,” he softly tells me, pressing his lips to mine and kissing me deeply, right before disappearing into shadows.

I head into the looming castle through an open archway that leads into a wide corridor with a long banister down the one side and what looks like a library through glass at the one end. I take a moment to pause, to take in my mum’s home and how familiar it all seems.

Something sharp presses against my neck, and I go still. The sword instantly drops, and I turn to see a female who looks familiar, too. Her eyes are wide, and her lips curl up into a smile. “If I was allowed to train you, you’d never let your guard down like that.”

“Who are you?” I question. Her eyes flicker to my daggers and then to the dust, ash, and black blood all over me.

“Your Aunt Phim, little one,” she says. “But more importantly, what in the gods happened to you?”

Howls echo in the distance, and Phim, my aunt who I’ve heard so much about, turns her back. She looks at me and

smiles. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” I ask her. “I need to see—”

“Your mama, yeah, I know,” she replies. “The alphas just told me your city has been attacked, and they want the Fall Mountain Pack army ready. I’m taking you to them.”

“Ah, the mind speaking thing,” I say.

She chuckles and looks me over. “Are you hurt?”

“Nothing major,” I reply honestly.

“Next question, how did you get here?” she asks, and I quickly fill her in on everything that happened, and I get the impression she is letting her alphas and my mama see all of this as we head through corridors filled with bookcases and up stone staircases. I don’t get long to take it all in before we get to a bigger stone staircase with statues of different people on each step, all the way to the top. The staircase leads out into the entrance hall and finally outside to a courtyard where I see my mum talking to a boy. The boy has dark curls and blue clothes, and when he looks over, his eyes make me pause mid-step. He has my eyes, my mama’s eyes, and the brilliant green is so bright.

My brother. Kendric Fall.

I smile as I look at him, taking in how he looks so much like my mama and me, but his features are a little different here and there. Mama tries to stop him, but he escapes and runs straight across the courtyard and into me, giving me no choice but to catch him or have us both fall over. I sigh and hug him back, and I breathe in his scent.

“I’m guessing you’re my brother, Kendric?” I question as the boy squeezes me so tightly it hurts my cracked ribs. Some pain is worth it. I think. I’ve never been around children, and I don’t know what to do but hug him back.

“I’ve wanted to meet you, and the gods helped us find each other. I will protect you because I’m a born alpha and very strong,” he tells me into my ear. I chuckle low and relax in his arms, enjoying the moment for a little longer before I have to

let go. I'm covered in blood, ash and dust, but it doesn't seem to matter at all.

"I'm very lucky to have such a strong little brother," I reply, looking over his shoulder to my mama. Her hand is on her mouth, her eyes filled with tears, and I realise she must have waited a very long time to see us together. I clear my throat and offer him my hand.

Aunt Phim stops in front of us, her hands on her hips. "You need to be down with the other children somewhere safe. Aunt Breelyn must be going out of her mind with worry. It isn't safe."

He puffs up his chest as Mama comes to Aunt Phim's side. "I'm here to protect my sister and family. It is my duty."

I look down at him, so brave and cute.

"Kendric," Mama begins, her tone soft but strict. "Many need our help, and you are distracting us from helping them. An alpha would know when to go and stay with the other children."

"They need protecting too," I say. "And I think you're the best wolf for the job."

"Okay," he agrees, and Phim takes his hand.

She pauses and looks at me. "We will train soon."

"Nice to see you again, Aunt," I say with a smile, which she warmly returns before leaving with my brother.

Mama touches my back, and I glance around at the many, many wolf shifter guards lining the courtyard, but none of them are the alphas. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, but we need help," I tell her, blurting out the words. "My people need your help. Please."

"You don't need to beg, daughter," she says. "My mates are already on the way with five thousand wolves."

I could fall to the ground with relief, and my mum wraps her arms around me, holding me tightly. "Are you hurt?"

“My ribs are broken and my power is drained. Truthfully, everything is spinning, and I feel useless. I should be back there, helping my people,” I tell her truthfully as I rest in her arms for a moment, tiredness washing over me. I could use a long nap with Dray, Tarrent, and Nakoa nearby. If that is even possible without them wanting to kill each other.

“Good leaders know when to listen to their bodies and get help—”

Mama pauses mid-sentence, and I turn, following her gaze to the night sky where a dragon fills the sky. On his back are a couple of people, and I hope it's Tarrent and Nakoa at least. Draycian's bright, glittering gold scales shine in the moonlight, and I sag against my mama in relief he is alive. The wolf guards around the courtyard all seem to skitter and move back to the wall as Draycian lands nearby, dust sweeping up around us. I walk straight up to my mate as Tarrent, Nakoa and Devika climb off his back before he shifts back into a gloriously naked male right in front of me. He has several long cuts and claw marks, bites too, but nothing looks too deep.

“Arawn?” I question, brushing over to him.

“The coward fled before I could kill him,” Draycian growls. “But he will need time to heal, and I will take a day before I hunt him down. He will pay for everything he has done.”

My smile at his return slips as I think of Sophie, and I give him a shaky nod. I feel like it won't be as easy as Draycian thinks it is to hunt him down, but he pulls me into his bare arms, and lips fall on my neck as he sinks his head into my shoulder, breathing in my scent.

“I saw you flying,” he says into my neck. “Fuck, you scared me and turned me on. I like you with wings, my mate.”

I chuckle and hold him tight. “I couldn't let you face all that alone.”

“Together,” he agrees, leaning back and looking at me. His gaze shifts over my shoulder. “I want to know how you got

him out. I knew before the attack, before the ball, before all of last night. The wards on the city are linked to me, and the witch isn't as good at lowering them as he thought, but I didn't suspect it was for Nakoa's escape until now. A part of me suspected he lowered them for Arawn to shatter later on, but I see that isn't true."

I bite on my lip. "Are you angry? Tarrent wouldn't have lowered them without me asking him to get Nakoa out, and I should have known Arawn would use that to get in."

"He would have broken the wards either way. But yes, I am angry," he replies, his gold eyes burning. "Not with you but me. Fate clearly wanted Nakoa alive, or he would have died in the castle falling. I will think on all of this."

"He saved my life and killed one of the creatures," I tell him. "He is my guard, and he is simply mine."

"Sounds like a challenge, sweetheart," he replies, nudging my nose with his and letting me turn to find my mama, Devika, Tarrent and Nakoa watching us. Nakoa and Tarrent just look tired, and I'm glad there is no jealousy there. I can't deal with it at the moment, not after what just happened. Dray looks at my mum. "We flew in many of my shifters to the edge of the city to evacuate what we can. Can you send healers?"

"Already done," she replies. "We owe you for the war, and you are family. My alphas have an army dealing with any creatures left before searching the city for survivors."

"I owe you a debt," Draycian replies. "It will be repaid."

"No, you don't," Mama replies, looking at me. "You saved my daughter's life, more than once, and kept her safe for years. I hated you for taking her from me...but I think she needed you more than I ever knew. My daughter is everything she ever needed to be because of you, so we owe each other nothing. Get used to it."

He chuckles low. "I never thought I'd like you, wolf queen."

"Likewise," she replies with a smile before turning to me. Dray leaves me for a second to pull some clothes on that a

wolf guard brought over, and Tarrent comes to my side. He bows his head to my mama, as does Nakoa.

“The witch lord and guard, I presume?” Mama says, and I nod with a smile as she sets her eyes on me. “You need a healer for those ribs I sense are in pain, and some sleep. Come, you’re safe here. This is your pack and we are your family. Always.”

* * *

The next few hours are a blur where I meet two healers, a maid and a dozen other people I can’t remember the name of before I am finally left alone in a bedroom. Dray and Tarrent are in talks with the alphas over everything that has happened, and Nakoa is in the shower as I lie looking at the painted ceiling. It’s pretty, a forest with cherry trees and a deer walking towards the balcony window, but I can’t think of anything but what Arawn wanted, other than to destroy the city. But why?

Nakoa comes out of the bathroom wearing new leathers with a Fall Mountain symbol on the front and black boots. His hair is wet, falling into his eyes with how long it is, and he pushes it to the side as he comes over to me. “Get any sleep?”

I shake my head and sit up, touching the soft bed sheets. “I couldn’t stop him. He attacked the city, and I think it was because of me.”

“Why?” he asks, sitting on the bed facing me. He takes my hands and holds them in his.

I gulp. “He wanted me to rule with him, and everything he said to me was personal. It felt like he was doing this to hurt me.”

“He is a monster, Serei,” he gently says, lifting my hands and kissing my fingers. “He will be dead soon, and it won’t matter why. He won’t get near you again.”

I smile and nod, wishing that was true. I’m connected to Arawn, and I don’t think it will be so easy to stop him.

“Tarrent is my mate,” I softly start, my voice trembling. “I think I’m in love with him as much as I love you and Dray. By the fires, telling you this and risking you walking away is killing me.”

“Serei,” Nakoa sighs, cupping my face. I lean into him, placing my hands on his chest. He is still damp from the shower, and my hands itch to run through his hair, to touch him and never stop. “You can tell me all your secrets, all your truths, and I will never walk away. I love you.”

I nearly collapse in relief as I search his eyes. “I want you as my mate. I don’t want anything between us again...but you have to know that means if you have a true mate out there, then...”

I let the sentence drift between us because I don’t need to say it. He knows what I mean.

Nakoa lowers his one hand to my hip, pulling me closer to him and digging his other hand into my hair. “There is no one but you. When I close my eyes, I see you. When I’m weak, I pray to the gods for you to be strong. When everything in my world seems dark and empty, you are my bridge back to life.”

His lips fall on mine, kissing me deeply, and I moan into the kiss as my body comes to life. He picks me up and pushes my back against the headboard, and I run my hands down his large shoulders. He nips at my bottom lip before kissing my cheek, my jawline, and as I tilt my head, he kisses my neck. I jolt against him at the rush of pleasure I feel from that kiss alone, and Nakoa growls, kissing my neck once more. “I want to hear that noise again.”

I give him what he wishes as he kisses my neck, and I nearly come from that alone. Nakoa leans back, pulling me onto his lap, and I tug at his shirt, pulling it over his head and pausing to admire his chest, strong muscular arms and snug waist. “I’ve waited a long time for this. I thought we’d never get this,” I admit.

Nakoa searches my eyes as I look up. “Words can mean promises if we say them to the gods. You have magic, Serei. You can bind us. Forever.”

As he nibbles on my neck, I widen my legs around his hips until I feel a hard part of him pressed against me. He goes tense, his eyes darkening, and the look only makes me wish we had no clothes on. I think about his words through the haze of desire, and wonder if I can bind us like Arawn bound me to him, but without the loss of life part. I place my hand on his chest, right above his heart, and I let him place his hand on my neck, at the very place he knows I like to be kissed. I smile before closing my eyes and feeding my power into my fingertips before channelling it between Nakoa and me. It feels like my flames turn into a current, spiralling and building around us until there is nothing but the sound of our combined heartbeats. “I vow my life to yours in the name of the gods. I, Serendipity Fall, take you as my mate. For as long as the fires burn, we are as one.”

I don't know where the words come from exactly, but they feel perfect, and I suck in a breath, feeling an instant connection between us as my skin burns under Nakoa's hand on my neck, and my hand feels hot on Nakoa's chest. The magic fizzles in the air as I open my eyes and slowly lower my hand, feeling a soft breeze on my body. The flames burnt all of our clothes away, the blankets on the bed too, but I barely notice as I see the mating mark. On Nakoa's chest is a sword with flames spinning around it, all of it black, and swirls go up to his shoulder. Nakoa strokes his hand down my chest, brushing across my hard nipple, and I buck against him. “You're mine.”

“What does my mark look like?” I breathlessly question, extremely aware of how naked we both are now. My eyes flicker down between us, where his hard cock is pressed against his stomach, inches away from me. He is thick and long, and I stroke my finger down his cock, loving how he grits his teeth and freezes.

“The same as mine,” he breathes out, his eyes locking onto me. “We can stop, if you want, but you need to tell me now, or I'm going to take my mate. Right now. Hard and fast, and I will not stop until I feel you clenching around me as you come.”

By the fires, Nakoa is good at dirty talking. How did I never know that?

I wrap my hand around him, making him jolt this time, and lean closer, putting our lips just apart. “I’ve been yours a long time, Nakoa. I want my mate inside me.”

His nostrils flare just before he slams his lips on mine, his tongue finding mine. He grabs my ass with both hands and pulls me up, lining me up and easily slamming fully into me with how wet I am. I moan, arching at the feel of him. He feels perfect, and I am about to come already, just having him inside me. By the fires. His deep, husky voice fills my ears. “Ride me, my mate.”

I dig my hands into his chest as I rise up and rock my hips, back and forth, each movement making him brush against my inner walls, and I’m so, so close. Nakoa cups my breasts right before pinching my nipples, and it’s all too much. My pleasure explodes inside me, and Nakoa grabs my ass, holding me in place as he thrusts into me from below, controlling and extending my orgasm until I can’t think of anything but him. He kisses my neck, thrusting harder and harder, and right as I feel him thrust deep one more time, he bites my neck over the mating mark, and I spiral into another orgasm, seeing stars as he groans. “I love you, Serendipity. Fuck, I love you.”

I’m vaguely aware of Nakoa pulling out of me, picking me up, and carrying me to the bathroom. “I want to do that again, and I love you, too,” I tell him.

Nakoa chuckles low. “Anytime, my dear mate, but first I want to clean you up and taste you in the shower. I have a feeling we won’t get much longer alone.”

I lean up and kiss him as he carries me to the shower, and I wonder if we have time for me to taste him, too.

* * *

Nakoa kisses my head before leaving a few hours later, closing the door behind him. I try to sleep for a little longer before giving up and braiding my hair instead. Once I’ve done that, I

dress in the soft black leathers that fit my body perfectly, and clip my clean daggers to my thighs before going out of the bedroom and into a living area. There is a cream couch in front of a coffee table and a painting of another pretty forest. I'm sensing a theme to these rooms. I sit down on the couch and bury my head in my hands. The door creaks open, and a male I don't know walks in. My hand instinctively goes to my dagger before his scent hits me, and I get a good look at him. The male leans against the wall, looking at me with a cocky smile. "Hello, niece."

"Jesper?" I question, but I know it's him. He is family, and my wolf is already claiming him as one of our pack. Jesper has dark brown hair, blue eyes, and a muscular body under black leathers. An axe is strapped to his back, the bronze metal catching my eye for a second.

"Ah, so you know about me," he replies, leaning off the wall, and I realise he is really tall. At least seven feet. "Thank fuck you look nothing like my brother."

That's good to know.

He reeks of alpha wolf. Not as strong as the alphas I've seen here, but it's definitely there. He watches me cautiously still. "I wanted to meet you again."

"Me too," I reply honestly, "considering I don't remember the last time we met."

He nods, humming under his breath as he comes closer and sits on the other side of the sofa, spreading his arm across the back but not too close. "I'm not into talking much, never have been, but I'm going to say this once. I want to protect you and defend you in any way you need. You're all the family I have left in this world, and I'm here for you."

Something tells me he means it. His eyes are bright but clouded, like there are things in his past he doesn't want to tell me about, and I hope it wasn't from Ravensword. For him, I'm all the family he has left, and I can't help but feel a bond between us. He is my uncle, which is weird, as he only looks a few years older than me.

“You can ask me about your father and our family bloodline,” he adds in. “Can’t say it’s a good story, but you have the right to know. I’m hoping we will change our bloodline’s story to something good.”

“I don’t need to know about him, as he is nothing to me,” I truthfully respond. “But I want to know you, and I want us to change the story, too. Not everyone born to monsters is evil. Right?”

“Right,” he says, and he looks relieved. “Great. Do you want a drink of water? I’ve heard you’ve had a shit twenty-four hours, and you look a little pale.”

Typical overprotective alpha.

“I’d love one,” I say as he climbs off the sofa and walks over to a bar at the other side of the room, which I barely noticed was there. “And for the record, it started with a ball, and that part was perfect. The attack...no.”

“Your dragons will be looked after well,” he tells me as he pours two big glasses of water. “I’ve studied in most of the academies around the pack lands, and everyone loves the dragons for helping save the pack years ago.”

“That’s good,” I say tightly. “Many died today.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he gently replies, and I nod.

The door rattles a few times before it’s pushed open and Devika storms in, still in the dress she wore to the ball. It makes me think of Sophie. One look in her eyes, and I know she knows Sophie is gone. I stand up and walk to her, and she embraces me back. “Bastard. He is a bastard for taking her life, but I’m glad he didn’t get you.”

“She wasn’t alone, in the end. I honoured her how I could,” I whisper. “I wish I could have saved her.”

“You gave her true freedom, Serei, and don’t forget it. You couldn’t have saved her from him,” she whispers to me and clears her throat. “Who is here with—”

A glass falls and smashes on the ground behind me as I let Devika go, only to find her staring at Jesper. Her mouth drops

open, and as I look at Jesper, I find he has the same expression. He looks equally shocked. I look between them, wondering what the hell's going on as Jesper walks straight across the room and stops a foot away. I take another step away, wanting to be anywhere else, as I suspect what is happening.

They are mates.

"I'm—" Jesper starts.

Devika turns and walks out, the door clattering shut behind her, and I stay very still.

"Her name is Devika Bloodsong, and she is a witch," I softly tell him. "And I wouldn't take it personally... She isn't a fan of males."

Jesper pulls his eyes from the door and smiles at me. "She is my mate. Devika."

He rolls her name around on his tongue, and his eyes spark with a challenge. Alpha males. Devika is going to eat him alive.

Thankfully, the door opens and Dray walks in, followed by Apollon and Nakoa. I'm surprised to see Apollon here, and I instantly wonder who is protecting Nimmy. I don't get time to ask him, but I was told Nimmy found her family, so she won't be alone. I miss her, but I'm happy for her. "We are leaving and heading to the witches' city."

"Hello, mate," I say in response, and he smiles as he comes to me, smelling like he has showered recently. Nakoa smiles at me, even in Dray's arms, and for a moment I think everything might be okay. "Wait, we are travelling to the witch city? Why?"

"Remember the prophecy I told you about? Well, the witch lord has received word they have found something about it. We need to know who this new goddess is. Tarrent will be here soon. I believe we need you further away from the city because Arawn will know you're here," he explains to me. "We will get this new goddess on our side, wherever she is, and destroy Arawn for good."

“Alright,” I say, placing my hand on his chest. I need to tell him about the Wolven gods. I just hope Tarrent’s witches have found something about them too. He strokes his hand down my back, over the top of my new black cloak. The clothes left out for me are a little tight—thin black leather leggings and a long-sleeved shirt—but I’m thankful for them over the bloodstained clothes I had before.

“I am coming with you,” Jesper says.

“Who is this?” Dray questions, a hint of violence in his voice.

Jesper grins and winks at me, getting a growl from Dray. “Jesper Ravensword. Her uncle.”

Dray visibly relaxes and nods to him. “Fine. Welcome to the shit show. We leave in an hour.”

Forty-Three



A PORTAL OPENS up like a wall of glistening stars, bright and shiny in a million different colours, and it takes me a few blinks to look fully at it. I glance behind me at Nakoa, Devika, and Jesper, the latter two pretending not to look at each other. Tarrent hasn't said a word about the new mating bond, but Silas, Valentine, Ragnar, and Henderson cheered when Jesper publicly told them. Mama simply sighed and embraced me before leaving us to wait for Tarrent's witches to open a portal for us.

I glance behind me at Devika, who is standing as close to Nakoa as she can get and as far away from Jesper, who watches her still. Nakoa's eyes find mine, and I smile, wanting to tell him I love him... I need to hear it back once more. Dray's hand tightens in mine before letting go, and I wonder how well Dray is going to handle going to a city where he isn't the king. Tarrent steps to my side, looking down at me with tense eyes. Something softens his gaze, and I give him a fond smile. We need to have a talk alone soon. Tarrent, our mating bond, and all of it needs a long discussion. His hand finds mine, our fingers touching. "Welcome to the city of the witches. To my home."

I step forward with Tarrent, stepping out into humid air that wraps around me, and I get my first look at the extent of the witches' city from where we stand, high above the city in a tower. The city is a star, literally built into soft green hills that part to make the shape, and within are towers of all different colours and houses stretching for as far as I can see. The city

smells like sea salt, foreign spices and wet grass. We come out on a circular platform with strange symbols across the floor, and in a large circle around us are at least twenty witches. They all wear deep purple cloaks with silver diadems hanging from their heads, matching the silver staff each of them holds in front of them. I stand still as they all bow before I look over my shoulder. I expect to see Nakoa, Devika and Jesper come through with us, but the portal disappears into sparks that float away on the breeze. Tarrent follows my gaze, his eyes narrowing as he turns back.

“Open it back up,” Tarrent demands to the witches, but no one replies to his echoing voice. “Immediately.”

Swiftly, each of the witches turns their staff to us, and the air fills with magic, the sweet echo of it swimming around us. Tarrent takes a step closer to me, his body ringing with tension. One of the witches steps forward and lowers her cloak. Sallette. “No, we won’t do that. You should bow to your new lady of the witches.”

Sallette smiles like a snake as she looks at me. “In one night, you lost your throne and city, and I gained back mine. How funny fate can be.”

“Funny isn’t the word I’d use,” I growl.

“If you want my city, you will have to kill me first,” Tarrent coldly states, watching her like prey.

She laughs low. “I wrote the rules for the throne and this city, and any royal who still lives can take back the position of ruler. You have no sway here. Not anymore.”

Tarrent goes still, looking around at the witches and then back to me. He offers me his hand, and I take it. He speaks low. “Make a portal. They have disabled my powers, and we need to leave. This is a trap.”

I nod and begin to look for any fire near us. There are two pits of fire by white doors leading into the tower, and I turn back just as a dagger presses against my neck. I freeze, knowing Arawn’s scent long before I look back.

Tarrent looks torn and as helpless as I must look as I'm forced to let his hand go and let Arawn lead me back a few steps. Arawn whispers into my ear. "I've missed you."

"Let her go and I'll do anything," Tarrent says, crashing to his knees, but I see something else in his expression. He is desperate, but there is a flash of hope, and I hold on to it as Arawn laughs low.

"The new lady of the witches has asked me to spare your life so she might toy with you," Arawn coolly states.

I look at Sallette, nearly all of the sweetness gone. "Do you love Arawn?"

"I always did," she replies with a mocking tone. "And Draycian was a way to power...but in the end, he wanted you. Shame for him."

"You're dead," I growl at her. I really, really hate this female. For a moment, I felt sorry for her for being locked up with Arawn as company for so many years or wherever he kept her. But he clearly got into her head, twisted her from whatever good was there. The lover Dray had is long dead, and this female is out for herself now.

Arawn tuts in my ear. "Don't be so mean, Serei. This is just the start of the show. Let's go and see the rest of your family before we make our grand departure."

I scream as he pulls me through the flames, much like how I travel between them, and I realise that this is one of his powers that I somehow have. I don't think he knows I can do that yet, and I try to pretend Tarrent is going to be okay now that he is alone. Sallette didn't want to kill him, I reason with myself, or she would have let Arawn kill him. No, I have time to save him. The blue-tinted flames fade away, and I find us on the outside of the pack lands, looking down into them. I can sense an old, faded magic in the air, and it seems to wrap around the city. I know I'm right when I see a mixture of foul creatures and hooded witches lining the outskirts, unable to actually get inside.

“Why bring me here? What is the plan, Arawn?” I question, the cold air biting into my skin.

He makes sure to keep me uncomfortable, his body pressed into my back, his dagger biting close to cutting the soft part of the skin on my neck. “You hate Dray, but what have I done to you? I was your friend, and you were lonely. I always picked up on that; it’s why I liked you. But now, you’re just bitter and old and vengeful. How do you plan for this to end? Dray nearly killed you last time, and this time, he won’t let you escape.”

The wind echoes and howls around as I watch my mum’s pack lands and feel the tension rising in the air. “I want him to panic and come for you. Then he will see what has happened when he finds his power nearly gone.”

“What are you talking about?” I say, nearly laughing. How could his power be gone? I saw him fight Arawn only ten hours ago and destroy his creatures easily.

He breathes in my scent, and bile rises up my throat as he speaks, his voice husky. “Salette was my Trojan horse...if you even know the human story. I sent her into the city with a special necklace capable of stealing power. Salette’s family stayed in power for a reason, and that necklace was their secret. The first thing my witch did in your city was link her necklace to Draycian, and he was so distracted by you that he didn’t notice. Not until our fight. He is weaker...”

“You’re lying, like you always do,” I bite out.

He chuckles into my ear. “No more lies. Watch them come for you. Your guard, your king, your family, and then watch as they learn the power of the gods.”

I slam my head back into his, hearing a crack and a groan right before I run from him, pushing my power into my back and into wings that spread out behind me. I leap into the air, spiralling through the cold air and gasping as it hits my lungs. The edge of the city is so close, a fingertip away, just as something hard slams into me, and I hear the sound of a sword cutting through flesh. I scream in pain as I slam back onto the ground, my control of my power slipping away. Embers and

ash float around as I cough through the pain, blood filling my mouth, and I hold my side. I lift my shaky hand, seeing my hot blood, and cry as a hand sinks into my hair and pulls me to my feet. The pain nearly makes it impossible to hold my legs up, but I try, begging myself not to fall.

Especially when I see Draycian fly and land right in front of us, on the other side of the barrier. His eyes burn with fury, and as he goes to step forward, I scream out. “Don’t! It’s a trap! He took your power!”

Arawn punches me hard in my side, right where he stabbed me, and I see stars. I swear I black out for a second on the ground, and when I open my eyes, Dray and Arawn are fighting a few feet away. Arawn’s black flames spiral around Dray, forcing him down to the ground, and he...can’t shift. He isn’t shifting or using any power. Arawn wasn’t lying. Arawn slams a sword into his sword, straight down to his heart, and uses another sword to thrust it into his leg. Dray bellows to the sky, but he still tries to fight Arawn off.

“STOP!” I cry out, digging my hands into the muddy ground, and try to pull myself over to Dray, who looks inches away from passing out as Arawn makes more swords appear and stabs him. Again and again. Each time, it’s like he is cutting into my own chest. I can’t save my mate. Dray roars once before going silent, and I scream as I see his still body lying on the floor in a circle of flames with five swords plunged into him.

Arawn stands over him and looks down at me, and there is nothing but victory in his eyes. “Watch how your king falls. This is why you should have chosen me.”

I ignore him, trying to pull myself across the ground to Draycian, but my body is so weak, and I can’t focus on anything but pain. A sob escapes my lips as I carry on crawling, desperate to get to my mate. I need to save him. He can’t die and leave me, not now, not ever.

Arawn’s boots appear in my path, and he leans down, picking me up and holding me to his chest. I have no choice but to slump against him and look over his shoulder at the

barrier of the city. In the distance, I see Nakoa flying right towards us.

“Save him,” I mouth to Nakoa, hoping he can see, right before Arawn pulls us through the flames. I’m too weak to fight him off, but I hope Nakoa gets to Draycian and saves him. I hope Tarrent has escaped, and I hope my mama keeps the pack safe with her mates. As for me...I stay still and try to breathe through the pain. For a moment, a flicker of light burns my eyes, and I swear I see the outline of a female in the flames before we come out of them and Arawn drops me like a log onto the ground. Pain lances through my chest, and my heart races as a deep, horrible sense of dread sinks into my stomach. Everything is silent in a deeply unnatural way, and I know this place as I look down at the still puddle I’m lying in, the water soaking into my knees and hands. My cloak falls around me as I push my hand against my side, my blood soaking my fingers instantly, and I search for Dray in my soul. Our mating bond... But it’s empty and still, like it never existed.

I look around in the vacant darkness that scents like fresh snow, but it feels like nothing should ever exist here.

This is where I saw the Wolven gods in my dream...but how can it be a real place? Why would Arawn bring me here, and how could he? Arawn strokes the top of my head, like I’m a child, as he crouches next to me. “In my first year alive, my goddess told me the story of the Wolven gods. She was one of the first old gods to be created by a human, and they let her live here with them. They wanted to study her and see if they had made a good choice. In that time, one of the Wolven gods whispered the secrets of their past to her as he loved her, apparently.”

I stay still, struggling as everything blurs. “My goddess told me that the Wolven gods were once nothing but dust that travelled between the worlds, watching and never touching until one of them changed. He touched this world, grabbed it, and decided to rule as a god for all to worship. The others followed and enjoyed meddling in our world.”

“Who cares?” I snap. “They will kill you when they see you here with me. They will kill us both.”

“Ah.” He tightens his hand in my hair, pulling me until I use all my strength left to stand up. “I never ended my story... Listen. There were once four Wolven gods, not three. One of them decided to leave his power behind and have a human life. He had a child, and the bloodline was blessed with the power to speak to the Wolven gods. Even find them. My goddess was close with this Wolven god, and he told her that only one with the blood of the Wolven gods could stop his brothers. He died shortly after.”

I stay quiet, and he keeps talking. I get the impression he has wanted to tell me this for a long time. “On my goddess’s deathbed, she revealed one more secret. A prophecy about a female born to this bloodline, one who could become a goddess. She showed me you and told me that we are fated to be each other’s end.”

The world spins around me, and I cry out as he tilts my head further back and leans in. “But you chose him. My enemy, you bitch. Now, you will suffer the consequences, and where is your king to save you?”

All I get to see is something silver gleam in the light before Arawn slams it onto my neck and tightens, the cold metal pressing into my skin. I reach for my throat, feeling the thick collar wrapped around my neck. “I designed this just for you. I could have made you a bracelet or a ring, but a collar is more suitable for a betraying bitch wolf, don’t you think?”

“Fuck you, Arawn,” I manage to say, and it’s worth it when he punches me in my stomach, and this time my knees give in as I fall to the ground. My head bows low as I suck in a few breaths to get through the pain, feeling more of my blood pouring out of the wound. How long can I bleed out without dying?

I catch a look at the collar in the reflection of the water, and it takes over my entire neck. It’s pure silver with writing all over it in gold, reminding me of the writing on Tarrent’s chest. Arawn grabs the back of the collar, using it to drag me

across the ground, and I can't breathe until he stops, and I tug at the collar to make some space, gasping in air.

The atmosphere rings with tension and power, right before they appear, just like they did in my dream. All three of them walk towards us, the puddle vibrating with the motion and not for the first time. I wonder how Dray managed to steal power from them without being killed. They are massive wolves, and their power makes me want to cry from the force of it as they tower over us. If they didn't come from this world, then why do they make themselves look like wolves?

"The queen comes to us without the king's head," one of them says, but his voice is a roaring ache in my mind, and I can hardly stand it. I can feel how angry he is, how they all are, and it's enough to make my heart wish to stop beating. "And how dare you come here, fallen god."

"You made a mistake coming to our world and using your stolen power to rule," Arawn begins, and everything trembles.

"Did we?" another one of the Wolven gods all but purrs. "We helped them grow and change, and we watch. You interfere and take. It is you that made a mistake, Arawn. You should not have killed her."

"I enjoyed her death," he wickedly replies. "And I will enjoy yours. I will show this world what a true god is."

Arawn lifts his hand, his other still holding the collar, and magic like I've never felt before slams into my body. My back arches with a scream that rips from my throat, and all I can see is fire, as it feels like my soul is being pulled out of my body bit by bit. White hot flames pour out of my chest and into the air above, swirling and spiralling around in so many shades. The Wolven gods howl...and the sound echoes for only a few seconds as I manage to pull my gaze to them. Black and white fire is streaming out of Arawn's hand into the wolves, encasing them within it, and they are burning.

They are dying.

Arawn is going to kill the Wolven gods. By the fires...I can't do anything but watch. Each one of them howls in pain,

the sound haunting and one I never will forget. Tears fall like hot embers down my cheeks as I watch them die, and Arawn laughs and laughs. He has gone insane. My whole body is smothered in the flames along with Arawn, but neither of us feels the true pain of the fire like the wolves burning away into ash. The fire stops and Arawn lowers his hand, and for a moment there is nothing but silence.

Silence in a world of gods...because there are no more gods now. The ash...it begins to float into the air, pulling itself together until it's a swirling sphere. I feel drawn to it, but I can't move, my body frozen and Arawn's grip on the collar too tight. Arawn places his hand out, and the sphere gently floats across to him. The second it touches his palm, it dives into his hand and Arawn changes...so do I. I feel a power like nothing else spread between him and me, and it's incredible for a moment.

Until Arawn lets me go and shoves me to the ground. Everything feels cold as I gasp, clutching my side, and I look up at him. His skin glows unnaturally, and embers flicker under his skin, just bright enough for me to see. His eyes glow like flames encased in darkness, and he smiles. "Finally."

"You killed them," I whisper, my voice croaky.

"Welcome to your new world, goddess of the embers," he breathes out, drunk off the new power. "I am finally the god I was born to be. The god of the flames."

I'm a goddess? I try to deny it, but I can feel the power travelling in my veins, like a ghost of a friend that I haven't even begun to understand. This is what Draycian stole, this power, but what Arawn and I now share is a power unlike anything else. I can sense it. There is no one stronger than he and I are now...and everything he told me has come true. My ancestor was a Wolven god, and Arawn has successfully used me to kill what is left of the Wolven gods who came to us a long time ago.

I can't let him leave this place. He will destroy everything and everyone if he does. Dray won't stand a chance, neither

will Nakoa nor Tarrent. I love them...and he will kill them to hurt me.

Arawn places his boot on my chest, pressing me into the ground, and I grip his boot, trying to push him off. My power, even now, is so far out of my reach. I feel weak and useless, but I won't give up trying. I will fight with only my hands if I need to.

My wolf howls and fights to come to the surface, but something blocks even her. "I will be leaving now, going back to our world, and you will stay trapped here forever. Maybe in a thousand years, I will come back and see if you wish for something else."

I make sure to look into his eyes so he can see me as I make a vow. A promise that magic will hold me to. "I'm going to take every bit of power from you, and then I'm going to use it to rip you apart."

He laughs and leans down, pushing all his weight into my chest. I bite down on my tongue through the pain. "Try to escape, Queen Serendipity. The Wolven gods could never leave this place...how will you?"

Black flames engulf him as he portals away, and I scream, reaching into the black flames only to feel nothing, and I'm left with only embers flickering down around me. A sob leaves my throat as I cover my face with my hands, and I scream loud enough for all of the worlds to hear me.

Someone find me.

Epilogue

ℒ

ARAWN THE FALLEN GOD

THE FORMER KING of the dragons bows his head in front of me, his blood dripping onto the tiled floors underneath him, and I smile.

I have waited a long, long time for this moment. The power of the Wolven gods courses through my blood, and the only one who could stop me is trapped for an eternity.

Draycian lifts his head, and I'm surprised he can move with how long I have beaten him. I've burnt, cut, and beaten him for every year that he trapped me in the prisons.

I will do so every morning as I rule this city and take over the rest of the world. It was a shame the others escaped with the previous witch lord, but soon, I will have them too.

“There is always a curse for taking their power.”

His voice is hollow and his words empty. I look down at the weak, pathetic excuse for a king. “Yes, but I did not kill them alone. Only one is cursed, and it will be your mate. Didn't you figure out the prophecy yet? It was always about her. Our goddess knew she would be born as the mate of one of her dragons, and only he could save her. You failed, Draycian. You both did.”

“NO!” he roars, rattling the chains tying him to the wall. I laugh and walk away, back to Sallette. I'll kill her before the year is over as I don't need a lady of the witches to rule this place, and she is no longer useful to me. Her necklace, on the other hand, I will keep. The Fall Mountain Pack will face my

armies before the sun rises tomorrow, and when they fall, the world is mine.

[Read the next book by clicking here...](#)

Description



**They say all gods can fall, but I will rise in the embers to
save us all.**

Queen. Chosen. Lost...

My name is Serendipity Fall, and I'm trapped in a world I don't know how to escape. When the flames burn, I'm shown the way out but at a price. I'm returning to my world as a goddess, and I can't control the power I've taken.

My world is crumbling, my people need my help, and I have to stop Arawn before he destroys my mates and then my world.

There are few gods left on this world, and I will be the last.

Prologue



RUNNING my fingers through my soft hair, I twirl a silky end around my index finger as I watch over all my males. My dragons. Sometimes I forget that I created them with my powers, especially when they are so much more than I ever dreamed they could be. Their beautiful dragon forms rival the beauty of their male forms, given to them by the fires. I never expected them to be as powerful as they are, or at least some of them. Not all were created the same. I watch over the sparring ring as Draycian and Arawn are tested against each other. The mighty clash of their powers is like watching the night fight with the day for the last minute in this world. Roaring fire and endless darkness slamming against each other over and over.

It's striking to watch the display, and many of my males have stopped to watch. To admire their power and to hope they will be like them one day. But they won't. Arawn was born in the darkest part of the flames, where my magic should not have touched, and Draycian was the opposite. Born from the lightest part of the flame, somewhere I didn't know my magic could reach even if I tried. Draycian never gave into the darkness because he is the light of the flame. Light always beats darkness, and the flames answer to him like he is their king. His flames are born to life around him, embracing his soul until there is no difference between him and them. Angry, burning flames that roar louder than a dragon. The darkness swims around Arawn, and I have sensed it from the moment he was created. I worked out that he was different, that they both were different. I should have killed Arawn and hailed

Draycian as our king. Part of me always knows that I should have killed Arawn outright when he was born so different from those flames. He is a darkness in this world, but perhaps Draycian could not have been created without his counterpart. One must know the dark to know the light, after all.

They both came to this world to change it. I believe my magic and judgment, even as a goddess, is never going to change that. I want to give Arawn a chance to see whether he can change this world for the better and differ from what he was born into. Not all gods are created in the same way; some are crafted in their experiences.

I stand up, my dress blowing around me and my feet sinking into the warm sand. I reach for the lead of my creature, and I freeze. An unnatural presence wraps around me, blocking out the world until there is nothing but an empty, chilly place around me I know so well. I can't be hurt here, but my heart beats faster all the same.

The cold air turns my breaths into ice, and my eyes close right before fire bursts out of my body in every direction and my powers take over as I become a vessel for them.

When I open my eyes, I'm floating in the air looking down over a massive, joyful celebration held in my throne room. At the front of the room, in thrones I have never seen before, is Draycian and a female I've seen once before in my visions. She's beautiful, young and powerful. A wolf born but a dragon queen in every sense. A goddess made anew, something the world hasn't seen before and will need to end all the wars and bring peace. I sense she is a great gift to her mother for her sacrifices in the world. The pair of them sit regally on the throne, two other males at their side shrouded in darkness. I cannot see them, but I sense they are linked by mating to the new queen. Her crown is a mixture of embers, flames and deep red blazing crystals, and it shines brightly as I watch her smile and laugh before placing her hand on top of Draycian's. The love that shines in his eyes as he turns to her makes my heart warm. This is his mate.

Suddenly the vision melts away, fading into another reality, one much darker, and instead of feeling peace, I feel

misery. Cold, dead horror spreading across the world.

A twin reality.

Arawn sits on a new throne, with the female at his feet, on her knees and bound to him. He is king, and the world has lost. Draycian is dead here, and so much has been lost. The female turns her head and looks across the room, her eyes completely black and no longer green like a forest.

She's not really here. Not anymore, but merely a shell.

It all depends on this female. She has to win; she has to fight, and Arawn must die at her hand.

I fall back out of the vision with a curse, landing on the floor, and my creature curls up on my chest, purring lightly as I run my hand through his dark black fur.

“We must save her.”

I look across at the sparring pair.

One will bring peace, and the other will destroy us all.

Forty-Four



IT HURTS.

By the fires, it hurts.

Flinching, I hold my hand on my bleeding wound and start to black out from the pain as my blood seeps through my fingers, dripping into the puddle on the surrounding ground. There is too much blood, and I'm not going to be able to stop this from taking me. From death taking me.

I can't die here.

I bite down on my lip and close my eyes. There is one thing I can do. Fire. It will stop the bleeding, but my hands shake as I even consider burning the wound shut. I look up at the endless black sky, thinking about Arawn using me to kill the Wolven gods and stealing their power through me. I think about Tarrent's city falling to Sallette and Arawn. My heart near enough stops as I think about them hurting Tarrent or, worse, killing him. Draycian and Nakoa float into my mind, and tears build up in the corners of my eyes. Arawn is going to kill them.

I try not to think about it. Draycian on that hill. So many swords slammed into his body and how still he was.

I'd feel it if my mate died. Right?

They need me, and I can't heal unless I stop the bleeding. A sob wrenches out of my throat as I push hard on my wound and close my eyes, calling on my power. Flames spread across my palm in answer, and I scream as I burn the wound, holding

on for as long as I can before I black out completely. I wake up again, my heart racing and blood coating my tongue from where I must have bitten it. My throat is raw from screaming, and my side is killing me, but as I touch the wound, I find it isn't bleeding anymore. A rattling cry of relief crawls its way out of me as I blink the tears away, feeling so weak. I search for my wolf, finding her deep within my soul, but I can't reach her here. Not when I'm this hurt.

Hours, days, weeks, I'm not sure how long passes as I lie on the puddle-covered ground and focus on my breathing, haunted with memories and imagining things worse than my memories happening to everyone I love. When it gets too much and I feel like I can't breathe, darkness pulls me under and, for a moment, there is peace. For a second. An empty, hollow second.

At some point, I find myself waking up parched, and I run my tongue across my dry lips before trying to sit up. It takes me three tries before I manage it and wait for everything to stop spinning out of control. I look around at the endless darkness and the puddled water that reflects the black stillness of this place, and hopelessness crawls into my chest, taking hold of my heart.

I need fire.

I pull on my power, anything that is left, but I get nothing more than a trickle of embers on my fingertips before my weak body nearly collapses. I'm too weak. I can feel my power underneath my skin, the new part of it, shining and bright like a flame living within my soul. But I can't touch it. I can't get close. This place, my injuries, all of it is against me.

"Come to me."

I jump out of my skin when I hear a female voice breathing down my neck, echoing around me, and I turn to my left, where it mostly came from, but there is no one there. Just darkness.

I've heard that voice before. The stranger in the flames. The female I see when I use the flames to transport myself.

“Hello?” I call out, my voice croaky and broken, but no one replies to me.

I’m alone.

My mates are in trouble, my family is threatened, and they are all in trouble right about now because of me. I let Arawn out. I unleashed him on this world, and I can’t fix it, not while I’m in here. I can’t fix any of it.

I need to get to them. I need to breathe. I can’t. I can’t—

A mixture of a cry and scream echoes out of me, over and over again, until I can’t scream anymore and I burst into tears, falling back onto the cold ground.

I’m going to die here.

And I just want to tell them—

“Come to me.”

The voice echoes around me again, and I’m tempted to try to crawl towards her, towards the hope of freedom and help, but I can’t. My body won’t move to the will of my mind, not when I’m this injured. I’m lucky I haven’t got a fever, not yet, but there is every chance. My wolf might heal me, but she needs time and rest.

I black out thinking of my mates, and my nightmares haunt me until I wake up on the puddled ground once again, wishing I was waking up anywhere else. My hands are still clasped together at my side, and I look down at the wound, relieved to see it’s beginning to heal. I find I have a little more strength than before. I’m healing. That’s good.

I will not die in this place yet.

“Come to me.” The voice shouts at me this time, almost like she is desperate. Like I’m running out of time. But I take my time crawling to my knees, flinching in pain as I manage to rise to my feet, my legs shaky and unstable, and everything’s spinning around me.

“Where?” I shout out.

“Come to me. Come to the edges of this world.”

The voice echoes around me again and again, getting louder each time she repeats it.

A part of me doubts if I should follow her voice, but I don't have a choice. I follow the voice into the endless darkness, only the sound of my heavy breathing and footsteps in the puddles to be heard.

I suddenly come to a stop when I sense something ahead. With a shaky hand, I reach out and feel a wall that can't be seen. I push against it, but it's strong and yet it feels warm.

"Let your flames free, goddess."

The voice is coming from the wall, and my heart lurches. I reach for my powers, but my body is too weak, and nothing more than a flame appears in my hand before dying away.

"I'm too weak. Too injured."

"Then wait and sleep," the voice replies, and my body suddenly feels tired. I fall backwards, my eyes closing, and this time I don't have any nightmares at all. No dreams. Nothing but fires and a female within them, watching me.

Time becomes as endless as the flames, and every time I wake, I feel my power rising like water getting ready to break a dam. Cracks of water spilling into my grasp, and I hold on to them, clinging to them like hope.

Finally, I wake one more time, and I feel different. I glance at my wound, which is nothing but a nasty scar now, glittering silver in the dim light. I've healed. My body doesn't feel like it's injured anymore as I rise to my feet.

"Let the anger out. Scream so loud every world knows you're coming, goddess."

Anger...fury. All of it builds, and I let it out in one deep scream. I let the flames out of my soul, and they burst in every direction, swirling into a tornado that spreads around me, and I smile, looking at the rich orange and red fire. It's as angry as I am.

The tornado builds with my emotions. The more I pour out of myself, the more the flames spread until they are existing

on their own, and I lower my hands. My flame wings spread out of my back, and I blink as I turn to see they are now white flames, blistering hot.

When did they change colour?

The flames around me begin to change too, the red burning away until it's angry white flames, and it's beautiful.

I run my hand through the flames, but they don't hurt me. They can't. These are my flames. That's when I see the female walking towards me, inside the wall that is now nothing but white flames and so clear. The female has long hair that comes out from under the cloak, the hood of which covers her eyes but still reveals her soft pink lips. I see her smiling as she strolls towards me and stops when we are inches away.

Almost like she is in the mirror and I'm not. Utterly unreachable, and I'm not sure she's real. For all I know, I could have died back there, and now I'm seeing things, wishing my way out of this trapped hell.

"Do you know who I am?" she asks, and while this close, her voice hurts my ears like I'm not meant to be hearing her at all. I've heard this voice before, when I travelled through the flames and saw the female within them. I wasn't sure she was even real then, and I wonder why it hurts so much less now to hear her voice.

"No," I whisper back.

"Mnemosyne the goddess, and I've waited a long time for you, Serendipity Fall."

I blink, watching as she lowers her hood, and my eyes widen, recognising her from statues in the city. She is far more beautiful in person. No wonder Arawn fell in love with her.

She lowers her head in a bow, and I bow my head back instinctively. "You're dead."

Her laugh echoes. "Females as powerful as we cannot simply be killed and disappear from this world. We have our own secrets, and this is my last secret. My last chance to save this world, and it's you. The world has waited for you alongside me."

“I’m nothing but a failure. I let Arawn out, cursed this world, and now I’m trapped. I’m useless. Sorry to let you down,” I bite out.

She softly smiles. “Arawn would have escaped either way, child. You did not curse the world, and you are far from useless and trapped.”

She reaches up her hand and places it on the wall, flattening her palm. Her eyes tell me to copy her, and I do, placing my hand directly where hers is. I feel nothing but heat right before her fingers curl around mine and she pulls me straight into the wall of flames. I gasp as they surround me, drown me within them, and when I crash out the other side, I fall in a heap on my knees, shaking from head to toe.

Mnemosyne comes to stand over me, reaching down and cupping my cheeks. Parts of her are flickering away like embers in the wind, starting with the bottom of her cloak and the ends of her hair. She is disappearing. “I’ve waited so long to do this, to help you in this final moment. Arawn is an evil I should have killed, but he got to me first, and I knew it was coming. The reason why he killed me so easily is that I’d already cast a powerful spell, using all my magic and parts of my soul to let me be here in this moment in the future.”

Tears fall down my cheeks, and she wipes them away. “I died to free you from this place, so you can go back. Go back and save them all. Save my dragons and be the queen they need. Fight, Serendipity, and kill Arawn. He used you to take the Wolven gods’ power and kill them, but the power is yours, and he only got half. You are a goddess now, and you must embrace this.”

There isn’t much left of her now, just her arms, chest and face. Embers dance around us both. “Do you understand what you must do?”

“Yes,” I breathe out. “Thank you. I can never thank you enough.”

She smiles so brightly. “It is my honour to be here and meet you. Your power is endless, and if you win, your children

will rule this world and there will be peace for millions of years. Be careful, and may the flame goddess rule.”

She leans forward and kisses my forehead, her voice but a whisper. “Take back the witches’ city first. Find the sister who should sit on the throne. It was never your mate who was destined to rule that city. Find your guard second, and finally save the king. Together, you will win.”

“I will. Thank you,” I whisper, resisting the urge to cry as she is nothing but an ember-filled shadow standing in front of me. “I hope you find peace.”

“We will meet once more, in many, many years, when it’s your time. Save them all, flame goddess. Fix my mistake.”

She disappears into nothing but ash, and I watch as the ash floats into the air, swirling around again and again before disappearing into the night sky full of stars. The words leave me as I watch. “We endure the fall and rise in the ashes.”

I look around at the dusty ruins, the echo of old walls and crumbled buildings, before I realise exactly where she left me and what’s left of my home. I stand up in the ruins like a goddess reborn—because that is what I am now—and let my white flame wings spread out.

I’m not weak, I’m not trapped, and I’m never giving up.

I’m the goddess of the flames, and this is my world. Not his.

Forty-Five



THE HARSH WIND from the storm above rips into what is left of my blood-soaked clothes and into my eyes, making it harder to see where exactly I'm flying and to make sure I don't smack into a poor unaware bird. I feel every bit of sand, rocks, and grass that blows into me as I look up at the thunderous storms above. A loud rumble echoes from them as I carry on, wondering if I should shift into my wolf and run the rest of the way.

I continue flying, knowing I'm safer up here as I fly across a small lake, seeing a reflection of myself that makes my heart race. I look like a star of white light shooting across the black sky. My hair almost seems to have a white edge to it, lit up by flames and matching my massive wings. I pull my gaze away and swoop over a small forest, finally seeing the whole city right below a hill. The Fall Mountain Pack.

My mama's home. Mine too.

I sweep and land on the hill, the grass cold under my feet as the storms above grumble once more, threatening to rain down on me. I make my wings disappear as I look at the city, because I don't need too many questions from whoever's going to see me first. I just need to get in and see my mum to make a solid plan to save my mates, kill Arawn and bring peace to the world. No pressure.

My chest feels tight at even the thought of my mates, and I push them to the back of my mind just so I don't fall to my knees. I need to make sure Arawn doesn't know I'm back, and

I can't stand out here all day. Mnemosyne told me to go to the witches' city first to find Devika, and I trust the goddess. After all, she saved me. I look over at the dark city and freeze, realising there's a shimmery protection of magic all around it. Even now, I can't quite see it unless I focus, but I know it's there, and it stretches around the edges of the city to make a giant dome. It isn't the only thing guarding the city. Angels fly in formations around the dome, and the ground is littered with patrols of wolves, both shifted and not, their armour glittering in the night. Lightning flashes above me as I watch them, and I wonder for a second about how I'm going to get past them.

Fuck it.

I'm walking in. I walk across the ground towards the wolves, a group of five of them passing nearby and, as my scent carries in the wind, they swiftly turn their eyes to me. I brace myself, knowing they're not just going to trust me and let me in, and none of them will recognise me. The wolves charge at me, one massive brown wolf in the front taking the lead and growling at me as I flash a wall of fire between us in warning. The wolf snarls, digging its paws in the ground as the others circle around me.

I growl right back and get ready to shift right before an angel swoops down and lands in front of me with a spear aimed at my throat. Three more land around me, their sharp spears inches away from my ribs on either side of me. The wolves continue to circle me as the brown wolf shifts into a handsome male with curly brown hair and blue eyes.

I slowly hold my hands up in the air. "I'm not here to harm anyone. My name is Serendipity Fall, and your alpha will want to see me."

"Liar. She's dead!" the male wolf snarls at me. "She has been for a long time. How dare you come here and pretend to be our princess? You will die, pretender."

"I am her," I snap with a low, threatening growl. "And you will not speak to me like that."

He pauses for a minute as I let that deeper part of me take over, that alpha part of me that will not let a weak wolf shout

at me and threaten my life. His eyes widen and a whimper escapes his throat as he backs away. The other wolves run away from me altogether. The angel, fully in amour, doesn't move or say a word.

I look at the angel in front of me, only able to see his blue eyes inside his helmet. "I'm a wolf and I make fire. Who else does that other than Serendipity Fall? Aka, me."

"It could be a trick from the witches," another angel replies, poking me a little with the spear.

"They're always playing tricks to try to get past our defences."

The wolf, who is still whining, croaks, "She's an alpha born. Let the alphas see her."

"Not if she is a threat," the angel in front of me states.

"Lower your weapons. NOW!" The command comes from a deep voice that, for some reason, sounds familiar, like I've heard it in my dreams but don't really know it. The angels immediately lower their weapons and step away as I watch an angel stalk through them to me. He's older than me, his wings are pitch black and tightly tucked behind him, and he is tall. I eye his shoulders with the strange, fleeting memory of someone holding me on their shoulders, running across a beach to catch a ball.

His dark eyes are wide and filled with so much emotion that I don't know what to say as he blinks a few times, tears filling his eyes. He slowly comes to stand in front of me and places his shaky hands on my shoulders. "Is that really you, Dip?"

"Yes. Who are you?" I question.

"My name's Niall, and I looked after you for a while for your mother. You were just a baby back then, toddler when you left, and I've always wanted to see you again. I thought you were dead," he tightly grumbles, and I remember him now. He sent me a few letters over the years, and mama always said he was a father to her.

“It’s good to finally put a face to the name,” I softly say. “But we don’t have time for a catch-up right now. I need to see my mum and the alphas. Immediately.”

And hopefully Nakoa. He was thrown back through the portal, and he might be here still.

I have a sinking feeling he is not, and I can’t sense him near me, anyway. None of my mates are nearby.

“Of course,” he quickly replies. “Mai...well, she needs to see you too. She never stopped believing you were alive. None of us did.”

My heart tightens, and I reach out, taking his hand. “I’m glad to be back.”

He smiles at that. “Do you mind if I fly you into the city? It will be quicker.”

“I can fly myself. I was worried about flying into that magical shield,” I admit, looking over his shoulder at it.

“You can see it?” he muses. “Not many can. It’s meant to be invisible, and it will not hurt you. As long as you mean no harm to the alphas, you can get through easily.”

“Perfect then,” I say as I let my wings out, the fiery ends spreading out behind me and white embers flying past in the wind. The angels and wolves break out into gasps, and one of them falls to his knees, praying to me.

Niall doesn’t look surprised, and I arch an eyebrow at him. “You have always been the most powerful person I ever met. Even as a kid. Now you simply look the part.”

I nod. “You can tell me more about that later.”

Without waiting for him, I shoot up into the sky and immediately relax into the feeling of flying in my fire. How natural and easy it is. He laughs below me, his deep chuckle echoing before he follows me. I sweep into the city, straight through the barrier, within minutes. I feel it pressing against my mind for a second to know my intentions are pure, and it easily lets me through. The city below me seems to come to life, and so many turn their heads up to look at me as I glide

over them. To them, I must look like a goddess...and I am one. I'm going to save them and bring peace to this world before I leave it. No matter what it takes. Shouts rise from below, a mixture of "The lost princess is back" and "The Dragon Queen has returned."

They all thought I was dead, and I'm not even sure I wasn't for a while. I need to find out how long exactly I was in that place. Days? Hours?

I haven't got a clue, but things feel too different for it to just have been hours. I fly straight towards the castle, following the river before going over the tall gates, then the forest. When the courtyard comes up, I almost sigh in relief as I land in it. The flames in the lights around the courtyard call to me in a whisper, promising me that I am theirs to command if I wish it.

It's like the flames themselves answer to me now. Perks of being a flame goddess.

Niall lands next to me, nodding once. "You're faster than me. Amazing."

I grin just as I hear a door slam open right before I see my mother running out. She looks like she's lost weight in her tight black clothes, and she looks so tired. But her eyes light up brighter than any star when she sees me, and a sob escapes her throat.

"Hello, mama," I softly whisper, my throat tight.

She falls to her knees and weeps into her hands. I run across the courtyard, my wings disappearing, and I fall to my knees in front of her, wrapping my arms around her as she embraces me back tightly.

"You're real. You're not gone. You're not dead," she repeats over and over.

"I'm here," I whisper back into her hair, breathing in her scent and trying not to cry. We hold each other for a long time, and I let her, knowing she needs this. She needs me. I feel the presence of her mates nearby, but they don't interrupt, even as

I look over her shoulder at them and see the relief in all of their eyes. And the love.

They have always been the dads I needed. I hope they see that, because I do.

Mama kisses the side of my head and then my forehead and then my cheek before looking into my eyes. “You’re different. More powerful...you feel like a—”

“Goddess,” I finish her sentence, and her eyes widen.

She still looks at me like she can’t believe I’m here. I can’t imagine what it’s like to lose a child, but seeing her hurting, it’s heartbreaking. “Good. I don’t care how you’re back. Just that you are. You need to tell me everything.”

“I think you need to tell me a lot, too. Is Nakoa here?” I question, and she shakes her head, my heart sinking. I gulp and she helps me stand up, clinging to my hand. “Where is he?”

“Right now, you need to tell us where you have been?” Silas interrupts. “Because you vanished and Arawn claimed to have killed you. Reine is off searching the cities for you as she believes you’re out there somewhere. We have wolves in every city, searching.”

“That bastard certainly tried to kill me,” I bite out. White sparks flicker off me in my anger. “And when I find him, I’m going to fucking kill him.”

“Good. We will help,” Silas growls in agreement.

Suddenly a bundle crashes through the alphas, and my brother slams into me, wrapping me up in his huge arms, squeezing me for dear life to the point of hurting. “You’ve grown so much!” I tell him.

“Training,” he replies with a grumble. “And I knew you weren’t dead. The gods told us you’d come back.”

“How do you know what the gods say?” I ask, arching an eyebrow at him.

His cheeks redden. “I wasn’t born powerless, sis.”

I ruffle his hair, which makes him go even redder, and he pushes me away a little before Ragnar tugs him back, and Mama smiles at me, her eyes confused and full of questions.

“Maybe we should gather everyone so I only have to explain it all once?” I suggest.

Mum nods in agreement. “Yes, are you hungry? I’d like to get you a shower, a healer check-over, some food and new clothes before we have a long talk.”

“I’m starving,” I admit, having not noticed until she said food. “And I’m sure I smell.”

“I don’t care,” she teases, wrapping her arm around me and leading me into the castle. “You’re still wearing the same clothes I saw you in last over a year ago.”

I pause mid step, my insides going cold. “It’s been a year?”

“Yes.” She furrows her brow. “How did you not know that?”

“It didn’t feel like a year for me...but it might have been,” I whisper. “Gods, a year. My mates have been out there, in danger, for a year.”

She hugs me tightly to her side. “They are strong, and they can’t be dead. You’d know.”

“Arawn wouldn’t kill them yet. He’d spend centuries torturing them first,” I whisper in horror. “I need to save them.”

“And you will. When you’ve eaten and rested,” she firmly tells me with her mama tone that means no isn’t something she will accept. “A few hours isn’t going to make a difference at the moment.”

My shoulders drop, and I let her take over, leading the way to her bedroom. After eating a month’s worth of delicious food, I shower and Mama brushes my hair before braiding it. I get dressed in the clothes she has left out and clip two magical daggers, no doubt gifts from Valentine, to my thigh straps.

I stop to look at myself in the mirror, noting the white streaks in my blonde hair, the glow that radiates over my skin,

and the tips of my mating marks peeking out of the black leather. I touch my necklace, rubbing my finger over the ruby and thinking about Nakoa giving me this before kissing me. I can almost feel his lips against mine until I look around and see I'm still alone. I straighten my back and head to the door, where my mama is waiting and offers me her hand. Holding my hand, she leads me next door to a private lounge that is full of my family. Phim, Breelyn, Callahan and the alphas take up most of the sofas, and Niall is leaning against the wall. They all turn to watch me as I walk in and stand in front of the fireplace, my arms crossed. Mama sits in the middle of the alphas, half on Valentine's lap.

"The Wolven gods are dead, and Arawn used me to kill them and steal their power," I start off, and Mama looks pale by the time I tell them all everything. We are all silent as I go and sit next to my aunt Phim, who places her hand on my upper arm and squeezes once.

"You're a new goddess. A flame goddess," Breelyn muses.

I smile tightly. "Goes well with my other titles. Like the dragon queen."

"Can you beat Arawn?" Henderson asks. "It took us many years to train in our powers, and Arawn has had longer than you."

"He's right," Mama says. "Having power means nothing if you can't control it."

"I can control it," I tell them. "It's like the power is part of me and it answers to me."

"Maybe it's different because you are a goddess, whereas we are connected to them by our souls," Ragnar suggests.

"I have a feeling that I can connect with the light side of flames, and Arawn took the darker side," I say, "but we are the same in terms of power. I just need to outsmart him."

"How do you plan on doing that?" Silas questions.

"Tell me what has happened with the world since I've been gone," I ask.

Henderson clears his throat. “The witches have taken over all of the American lands, turned humans into their slaves, and built one hell of an army pretty much overnight. Their capital city in the north has expanded. Arawn and Sallette have declared themselves the new king and queen of the witches. We’re not at peace with them, but they don’t directly attack us anymore because—”

Henderson pauses, and Mama continues. “Because of your people being selfless and brave. Arawn was attacking us and we were not prepared. He wanted the dragons, all the dragons in the city, and he would spare thousands of innocent wolves he captured.”

There is a misery to her voice that lances through my chest like a knife. “So they flew out of the city, even when we told them no. They gave themselves up, every single dragon. Nakoa was the first to leave, followed by Apollon.”

“By the fires,” I whisper.

“He took them...not before slaughtering the wolves that he vowed to let go,” Mama says with a sad snarl. “He is a liar, and old magic will make him pay for what he did.”

I bite down on my teeth, knowing this won’t be the only thing he has done since I’ve been gone.

“He probably killed all my people. He wanted that.”

“We’ve not heard anything from the city since October when our spy went silent,” Ragnar softly tells me. “At that point, they were alive.”

I get the feeling they aren’t telling me something, but it doesn’t matter. I will see for myself soon.

“I have a plan, and we need some help. I need to get into the witches’ city to find Devika,” I state.

“Why her?” Mama asks.

I nod. “It’s a long story, but I need to find her. She’s the key to all of this. But I need to get in without Arawn knowing I’m there.”

Henderson leans back in his seat. “That’s impossible.”

“It’s not impossible,” Mum interrupts, “but difficult. If we all go, he will—”

I cut her off. “I’m going alone.”

Her eyes quickly change into fury. “You expect me to let you go into an enemy city, alone, after we just got you back. I won’t let you die.”

I go over and she stands to meet me, and I take her hands. “This is my destiny. If I don’t go and stop him, then we all lose. You have to trust me. Plus the pack needs you and if this goes bad, Awarn can’t have you,” Her eyes are brimming with tears, but she eventually nods, backing down. “So I’m going to the witches’ city alone—”

“Not alone,” Nimmy says, pushing the door open and coming in. She looks far from the weak wolf I knew before, and it’s clear she’s trained. Her red hair is braided, and she looks like a warrior, completely dressed in leather with a bow and arrows on her back. I grin and rush across the room, and she catches me in a tight grip. “Good to see you, Serei.”

“I’ve missed a lot,” I whisper to her. “But I can’t let you come with me.”

“You’re my alpha,” she replies as we let go. “And I’ve been studying the witches’ city logs in libraries. I think I know where we could get in without being seen. It’s going to be risky, but once we are in, I’m a walking map to that place.”

I always knew she was amazing. “Thank the flames.”

I look back at my mama. “I’m going to need weapons and supplies.”

“And a ship,” Ragnar adds. “Lucky for you, I have a fast one.”

“Can’t you travel us through the flames?” Nimmy asks.

I shake my head. “The flames answer to him, too. He might feel a jump like that.”

“Luckily, I drive that ship,” Jesper says, stepping into the room. “And sense my mate. Together, we will find Devika.”

My uncle looks smug, and I'd rather not take him, but I have a feeling we don't have a choice. I glance back at Mama, and she walks to me, hugging me tightly. "You're my hope in the darkness, always. If anyone can stop him, it's you."

"I'll be back," I whisper to her as everyone starts planning our journey. For a moment, it feels like only me and my mama. Goddess to goddess.

"You come back, or I'm destroying this world to find a way to save you."

I hug her again, imagining her doing just that, with her alphas at her side. I have to save my mates and stop Arawn, or this world will be lost.

Forty-Six



SEREI, *Serei, Serendipity...*

I hear my name called out again, again and again in the total darkness around me. I call my flames to surround and protect me. The white light of my fire spreads into the darkness until I see the outline of someone right in front of me. A male. He's on his knees, his chest bare and golden with blurry tattoos. Thick muscles on his arms flex as he presses his fists into the ground, and his head is bowed. When I get a little closer, I realise exactly who he is.

"Dray?" My voice is like a whisper as I'm scared this isn't real and he is going to disappear any moment. His head shoots up, his gold eyes locking onto mine through the darkness. "Dray, is it really you?"

I don't know how it is possible, but a smile lifts my cheeks as I run to him, and when I get close, he disappears into white smoke.

"NO!"

I try to catch the smoke with my fingers, but it only swirls away from me in the wind. I hopelessly watch it go until it slams down to my left, shaping into someone else. This time, a man's fighting, punching another man again and again until I can't hear anything but the snapping sound of his nose. A thick gold chain is around his neck, but I'd know him too. "Tarrent?"

He doesn't turn to me, and I don't think he can hear me at all. He just continues to punch the person in front of him

viciously and without mercy. "TARRENT, STOP!"

Tarrent fades into white smoke again, and this time, the smoke hovers in the air in front of me. I swear I see Nakoa hidden in smoke at the back of what looks like a cage right before everything fades.

I wake up with a gasp, pulling air into my lungs and breathing heavily as I calm down. Was that really them? My mates? I rub my eyes a few times to remember where I am and look up at the top of the bunk bed above me, hearing Nimmy's light snoring. After I've calmed down, I decide I've had enough sleep and haunting strange dreams to last me a lifetime. I hope that I did see my mates, but at the same time, I hope I didn't, because it didn't look like they're okay. My heart tightens and I push down the wave of sickness. My mates will get out of this, I'm sure of it. I leave the small bedroom on the lower level of the boat and use the bathroom opposite before getting changed for the day, clipping my daggers onto my thighs and heading up the stairs to the main deck of the ship. It's not a massive ship, but it does the job. Ragnar said it used to be a small cruise liner that humans used for fun, but it's strong enough to get through the sea. Everywhere I look, I see things the humans would have used. The small empty pool on the main deck, the beach chairs and decorations.

Reluctantly, I look up, feeling eyes on me. Jesper is in the glass captain's room, looking down at me on the deck as sea water sprays across my face. Stars line the skies, and I'm not sure what time it is, but it's too early for us to swap, and he is likely wondering what I'm doing awake.

I walk up and let myself into the captain's room. Jesper smiles at me and tips a white hat he found as I lean on the wall, touching my necklace.

"Good morning. Didn't you sleep well?" he questions.

I don't want to answer that. "I can take over if you want to sleep for a bit."

"Nah, I nap on and off here." He pats the table full of strange buttons. "Just in case."

I look at him, how calm he is, and a part of me doesn't like it. "How come you haven't gone after Devika already? Tried to save her? If it was my mates, nothing in the world could stop me."

"I don't know her," he replies defensively. "And by the time I met her, she wasn't interested. Just because we're fated mates, it doesn't mean that we're right for each other."

"But usually it does."

"Usually, not always. I knew if I went after her, there is every chance she wouldn't let me help her," he says. "Besides, my home is with my pack, and hers is with the witches. We're not a match made in heaven like you and your mates."

I smile tightly at the reference to heaven, a human thing, a place of peace. "At least you're here now. I guess."

He looks out over the sea. It's not a storm, exactly, but the wind picks up the waves that crash against the side of the ship. "You don't remember your father's pack land, but I do, because I would have been the next alpha after him. He didn't rule right, but it doesn't mean there shouldn't still be a different pack out there. My fate is to go back to the lands of my blood and see what I can make of myself out there."

I furrow my brow. "Every wolf bows to my mama and her alphas. They won't allow a new pack."

"It's not up to them. The Ravensword Pack still exists, and many are not happy bowing to your mama after all this time. I'm the heir of the Ravensword Pack, and when this is over, I'm taking us back to our lands."

"Technically, I'm an heir to the pack too," I remind him with a growl, "and I bet the only supporters of the old Ravensword Pack are the sad males who can't force their females into submitting to them anymore. Why the hell would you want a pack full of males like that?"

He growls at me. "I'm not saying things won't change when I'm alpha—"

"You're not an alpha."

The statement is true, even if he looks like he wants to throttle me for saying it. “And if you make a new pack, my mama and her mates will make you bow to them. They have power and you do not. You need to rethink your grand ideas and make some new friends. My father was a monster, and his pack name will die with us.”

“No, it won’t,” he snaps back, standing up. “You didn’t even know him.”

“I know enough to be happy he is dead,” I bite back.

He hollowly laughs. “And you know everything, little niece? You may be a goddess, but Arawn built an army to protect himself, and you’re still delusional enough to think you can just walk in there and win this.”

I narrow my eyes. “I don’t need an army to stop him, and no army could stop me now.”

“Your king was just as arrogant, and look how quickly he fell,” he reminds me, and my heart is pierced. “I hope you don’t die, but in truth, I don’t see how else this is going to go.”

“Good to know you’re on my side. Why did you even come?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “You’re still my niece. Blood rules all.”

No, it doesn’t.

Love and a chosen family do.

I look at my uncle one more time, and this time, I see a bit of my father’s family shining through, far more than the upbringing that my mama gave him. She would be hurt to hear him talking like this.

The ship suddenly shakes and turns, and I grab on to the side of the edge of the desk as I nearly fall over. Jesper isn’t as lucky, and he slams into the wall with his chair and groans in pain.

“You alright?” I ask.

He holds his broken nose and nods. “What the fuck was that?”

I look out of the glass just as something dark lands in the middle of the ship, and it must have been what we slammed into. It takes up half of the small empty pool it lands in, and it has massive wings that stretch out of its sides like bat wings but fluffy. Its head resembles a lion, along with a big mane of black fur. But as far as I can see, it’s all black and its razor sharp white prolonged teeth shine against the night sky. It’s some kind of creature, and the only things I’ve seen like it are Arawn’s monsters.

“Arawn. Stay here,” I tell him, slipping a dagger out into my hand. I kick the door open and head out onto the deck, my footsteps echoing as I walk to the creature. I call my power to my fingertips, ready, and I spread my wings out above me. I jump into the air when I’m near and fly above it, but it meets me in the air with one swoop of its wings. I dive out of the way and fly back around the ship, narrowly missing its claws as it shoots right for me.

I turn back and my eyes widen as it slams into me, and we both crash to the deck. Pain echoes through my bones, and before I can manage to move, it jumps on top of me, crushing me with two of its huge paws on my shoulders. I still manage to press my dagger against its ribs, but then I can’t move. I freeze, unable to kill it for some strange reason. It feels wrong. What magic is this? I cry out as I feel the side of my neck burning, and a bit of the creature’s fur on his neck glows silver at the same time.

He leans down when it stops and licks my face.

“Gross, get off!” I shout, and it does, bouncing away and sitting like a well-trained dog. I touch my neck and feel a raised mark that feels like a sun and moon. “What the hell are you?”

It leans forward and presses its head into my stomach, and the world fades away. It takes me a second to realise that he’s showing me who he is, what he is. He shows me his life, bred in a cage and his mother killed. He shows me the males who

tortured him, killing him over and over, but he didn't die because he came back stronger each time. He was created as a gift for the god Zeus, but someone else saved him. The goddess Mnemosyne. He was only a little creature, hidden in a cage, and he cowers when she stands over the cage. *"Hello, little one. I've seen that we will be great friends. I'm here to free you."*

The creature's ears perk up. *"You're far more powerful than they could imagine. Your heart is too big for this cage, too. If you'd like, we can get out of here and you serve me."*

The creature stands up on his little legs and howls, his black fur shining brightly, and the cage walls fall away into dust.

"Very good. I've seen you don't have a name. How about Achilles?"

The vision fades into another one where Achilles is older, and he looks like he does now, but I get the impression a lot of time has passed. Mnemosyne is injured, holding her blood-soaked side, and looks like there's a sword in her back. She must be in such pain.

Achilles runs to her, holding her weight to his side. *"Find the Queen of the Dragons in the future. She needs you."*

My heart pangs. The goddess tried to help me so much, years before I was even born. Achilles stays with Mnemosyne until her last breath, and his roars bring tears to my eyes as the vision fades.

I open my eyes and wrap my arms around Achilles, who whines softly.

"Get away!" Nimmy shouts, running to us with a raised sword. I step in front of Achilles, and Nimmy stops, frowning.

"He's mine and safe," I tell her.

"What is it?" she asks, looking a little fearful but trusting me all the same.

I sigh. "Its name is Achilles, and I don't know exactly."

"How are we going to hide him in the city? He's massive."

On cue, Achilles disappears into nothing but shadows. I can sense him there, but Nimmy can't. She looks around, and I smile, placing my hand on his head as he reappears.

Nimmy still looks a little strangely at Achilles before sighing. "I'm going back to bed. This is just a really weird trip."

I chuckle because she's right. The sun appears over the edge of the horizon, casting bright orange light into the world. All I can think of is my mates, and I hope they can hear me and know that I'm coming for them.

Forty-Seven



WE TAKE six days to travel across the sea before we come to an abandoned port that Nimmy thought would be best. Her research suggested this place hasn't been used in a very long time, and she was right. It's breaking apart and well past its time, but thankfully, no one's there except for a few stray foxes and birds. We dock the ship in the middle of the night before making our way through several towns, and finally as the sun begins to rise, we stop in an old house that reminds me of the house I met Tarrent in. I don't think I'll ever forget that day, and I should have known he was my mate. I felt a connection to him immediately.

After a restless night, I quickly wash down with a bucket and a towel before eating the rations we have with Nimmy. "I'm sorry we had to come here. Of all places," I whisper to her after Jesper leaves in his wolf form to run in the woods and make sure we are alone before we set off.

She tenses. "I swore to myself I'd never come back to these lands...but then Apollon had to get captured and come here. There isn't anywhere I wouldn't go to save him."

My eyes widen. "Are you and him?"

She shrugs. "I mean, there is this unspoken thing between us. He is my best friend, and I hope it's more than that. For me...it's always been more than that. I was too scared to let him close because of my past. Now, I realise I should have held onto every moment I had with him and never let go."

I understand completely, her words hitting me deep in my chest as I feel the same way about my mates. I wish I kissed them one more time. Held them close a day longer. I wish we didn't have the world against us when it really counted.

Nimmy clears her throat and spreads out an old map in front of me. "The sewage drains are not far from here, at least an eight-hour run in our wolf forms. It's not going to be nice down there."

"It doesn't matter," I tell her.

She nods as Jesper comes back in, his large white wolf taking up the doorframe before he shifts back, completely naked. We both look away, and he groans. "Great. We have all that extra strong sense of smell to make this trip delightful in the sewage drains."

"If you'd prefer to walk in the front gates, go right ahead," I bite out.

He laughs. "Chill, niece."

Nimmy and I share a look. Nimmy doesn't like Jesper at all and has made every point to make sure he knows that, including the look she gives him now. I clear my throat. We need to stay united. "There might be magical protections on the sewage drains. I should go first, and if I sense any, I might be able to burn through them with my fire."

"Arawn and Sallette are arrogant, from the rumours I've heard. They won't have any protection on them, because they assume you will just go for your mates. They will be protected and watched," Jesper points out, and he is likely right.

I gulp. "Let's just get into the city and figure out the rest later."

We repack our things into our backpacks before we each shift and carry the bags in our mouths, heading out into the night. Running with other wolves will never get old for me, and I nudge Nimmy's wolf, who nudges me right back. We don't stop until we get to the abandoned road and stay in the forests at the side to make sure no one sees us. We find the big steel-bar doors to the sewage drains we were looking for, and

all of us shift back before getting dressed. It's not too dark, thanks to the moon, but I make a fire in my hand and push it against the bars. They slowly burn into thick chunks of steel that fall to the ground, and I step in first through the gap.

Jesper hands out human devices called torches that easily light up the tunnel before I find the metal grate on the ground. He pulls the grate up after turning it a few times, and I look into the deep hole, wincing at the smell even from up here. I take a deep breath of the fresh air coming in from outside before making my way down the ladder. I'm not sure where Achilles is, but he won't be following us in this way. It's too tight for his big body, but I have no doubt he will figure out a way in. The smell is awful, and when I'm forced to breathe, it's so much worse. Jesper gags several times when he comes down, followed by Nimmy, who is trying not to say anything at all. Thank the fires I'm not claustrophobic, because this place gets small the further we travel in the tunnels before we come to a crossroads. Rats scurry past us as Nimmy steps forward. "Three lefts and then one right. That should bring us out somewhere quiet."

Not wanting to talk more than needed, I nod and keep my senses on alert as I follow her instructions. Eventually, the tunnel levels out to a circular room with several tunnel entrances, and we all breathe a sigh of relief. At this point, we're thick up to our waist in literal shit and who knows what, and when I see a pair of ladders, I all but run to get to them.

"Be careful," Jesper warns me, and Nimmy nods in agreement. Pushing my nerves aside, I climb out of the tunnel and up the ladder, Jesper and Nimmy close behind me. When I get to the top, I push the grate and peek my head out. It's dark, but the alleyway is empty other than a ginger cat sitting on some old boxes.

"Clear," I whisper before pulling myself out. I help Jesper out before he pulls Nimmy up and closes the grate behind us. We duck behind the boxes and sag against the wall for a moment, listening to the quiet city and looking up at the stars above us. There was a time when the most important thing to me was looking at the stars. Now I feel like they are laughing

at me, because the most important thing was always my family. I just didn't know it.

There's a stillness to the air and the smell of death in the wind that is hard to ignore. Nimmy pulls out two cloaks, and Jesper has a matching one before she hands me one. We try to clean off the best we can in silence for a moment, none of us commenting on the smell. "Queen Mai said they pulled these from dead witches who attacked the pack lands. They should help us blend in."

I tighten my hands on the thick, dark purple cloak, which has been washed and cleaned as I can't scent blood on it, before pulling it on and tightening the string to seal it. We all keep our hoods up, making it hard to see, but it's worth the risk of making sure no one looks twice at us.

"Your turn, uncle. Find your mate," I tell him. The sooner we get off the streets and to Devika, the better. We follow Jesper to the end of the alleyway and look out into the street. There are about six or seven people walking past, their cloaks pulled up tightly around them, and a few more are stopping at market stalls to buy food.

Trying to blend in, we head out into the street and down the long road that seems to stretch across the middle of the city. There are several marked districts we pass, and I get the feeling most of the city is asleep. "She's nearby."

Excitement tugs at my chest as we go into a district named Morgan le Fay District.

The houses are older in this district, made out of aged stone, and there are many small gardens made with circles and candles littered across them. I keep one hand on my dagger for the entire walk, and my power is just under the edge of my skin, ready to burst out and defend me if I need it. Jesper suddenly stops, and I frown behind him, looking around. There is a small space, just enough for one person to walk through at a time, between two houses.

I follow his gaze and find that wasn't why he stopped at all. At the end of the street is a long wooden pike, and speared on the sharp edge is a battered, bruised dragon body with no

head. Sickness rises in my throat as I'm tempted to scream and burn this whole city down. The only reason I don't is because Arawn would take my mates and let it burn. This is personal, between me and him.

I want to take his body off there to give him a proper burial, but I sense magic wrapped around it, and there isn't a chance of me getting near it without setting off some kind of alarm. Dammit.

Nimmy squeezes my arm in comfort, and I stay close to her as we walk past the body with Jesper, who is silent and pale. I can't imagine he has seen much death since the pack war, but he was a kid back then. Jesper leads us to another alleyway, and there's no end to it other than a thick black stone wall littered with rubbish and old, dead plants.

"Are you sure she's here?"

"She's very close. I don't understand. It feels like she's literally right in front of us," Jesper claims, and I don't doubt him. I can sense my mates are nearer now, and if I wanted, I could find them across the city within moments. Even unbonded, like Jesper and Devika.

"Maybe it's magic," Nimmy suggests, reaching out, and her palm flattens against an invisible wall. Suddenly, I feel a dagger pressed against my neck and freeze, my power bubbling to the surface.

I turn my neck but I still can't see who is holding me. "I suggest you let go before you find yourself nothing but ash at my feet."

He huffs at my threat, letting me go a little, enough to move. "I think not, stranger."

I turn my head to look into the frozen blue eyes of a male with thick dark hair that falls to his shoulders and a cold expression. "Wherever the fuck you came from, go back."

"No. I'm looking for Devika," I bite out. "And you can tell me where she is, or I'll make you."

"Not before your friends die," he coolly replies. I look at Jesper and Nimmy, who are both held by hooded figures and

sharp weapons.

“Let them go.” I hear Devika’s stunned voice right before she literally steps out of nowhere. Her hair is cut short into a bob, half of it in braids, and she is dressed in leather along with a dark blue cloak. She looks thinner and tired, but there is still fire in her eyes that brightens when she looks at us in shock. I grin and rush to her, along with Nimmy, and we both crash into her. She laughs and squeezes us tight.

“This is a shock,” Devika whispers, her voice thick. “I didn’t think I’d see you again.”

“Who are these intruders who stink?” the blue-eyed male demands.

“Friends,” Devika firmly replies. “They don’t mean us any harm. Go tell the others the Dragon Queen is alive.”

“Others?” Jesper asks. Devika ignores him as we pull back, but she keeps her eyes on me. “Why are you here? It’s not safe.”

“For my mates. For Arawn,” I tell her, and her eyes darken. “And you’re the key to winning this city back, Lady.”

“How exactly do we do that?” she replies tensely.

“You can challenge Sallette for the throne. She was only powerful enough to take it because she stole Draycian’s power. I can take that power back, and then she will be a normal witch,” I explain to her. “Where is Tarrent? Have you seen or heard from Nakoa or Dray?”

Her lips tighten. “Tarrent has a gold collar and chain, and kills on her command. A pet for Sallette, and none of us can get near him. Nakoa and Draycian are going to be in the dungeons, with all the dragons. We have heard they are alive.”

“Alive is the hope we need,” Nimmy whispers in relief.

“Arawn will need to leave the city,” Jesper adds in, and Devika finally looks at him and nods in agreement.

“Perhaps we can get word back to Queen Mai,” Nimmy suggests. “She could make a rumour about stray dragons somewhere. Arawn will go to hunt them.”

“We’d have to time it perfectly,” I say, looking at Devika.

She tilts her head and takes Nimmy’s and my hands. I grab Jesper’s hand, and she pulls us through thick magic, changing the alleyway into a massive grass field with a small river in the middle. Brown and green tents flood the field, and there are so many witches moving in and out of the tents. Children too.

Devika looks at me. “We have an army. Let’s hope I’m strong enough to stop her.”

I hug my friend tightly, and she holds me back. “For Tarrent’s sake, me too. Once you take the city, I’m going to take my mates and run, and Arawn will follow.”

“I’ll make sure we hunt him,” she replies with venom in her voice. “He won’t follow you easily.”

“For Tarrent,” I whisper back, my heart hurting.

“For the true king.”

Forty-Eight



I FINISH BRAIDING my wet hair before coming out into the main part of the tent, glancing at Nimmy speaking quietly with a female witch on the other side. Devika and the male who held a dagger to my throat are sitting on thick, fluffy cushions around a fire in the centre of the tent. The male has lowered his hood, revealing dark brown skin and luxurious deep purple hair that falls around his thick, scarred shoulders. He is wearing a simple leather vest and matching trousers, and several cuffs are clipped around his arms. I turn away from his distrusting gaze and back to the flames that sing to me now.

The fire is magical, spitting pink, red and purple flames into the air, into the shape of a tree. Some of the embers are shaped like butterflies and doves flying around the ceiling, and some of them are escaping by flying out at the gap that lets out smoke. The witches have been nothing but accommodating, offering us food, a shower and shelter, without even needing to know who we are and what we want. They worship Devika, and it's clear to me that she is the leader they needed when a monster took over their homes. Some of them look at me strangely, not hostile, but like they are wondering how Arawn killed me and I'm still alive. I've told Devika everything that happened, along with five male witches she trusts, and they all are clearly loyal to her—and Tarrent, too. This was never how I wanted to meet Tarrent and Devika's people. I sit down on one of the cushions next to Devika, and on her other side sits the male who keeps his wary blue eyes on me.

He is hostile, and I don't blame him one bit.

Devika crosses her arms. “This is Sir Brenainn Vale. He was once the lord commander of the witch army.”

“Not anymore?” I question.

He watches me, assessing me. “No. Not since that bitch took the throne and declared herself the Lady of the Witches.”

“Good,” I reply. “But will the soldiers listen to you when we decide to go there to take back the throne?”

Nimmy walks past us, smelling goddess-damn awful, and into the shower room.

Devika goes tense, but she stays quiet as Brenainn answers me. “Yes. I trained many of them, lived alongside them my entire life. As did my father. And his father. My family has always been loyal to the true lord or lady, and that witch ruling now is neither.”

Devika leans forward. “Even if I kill Sallette, Arawn will come back.”

“Then make a plan. You will be the Lady of the Witches and have command,” I smoothly reply. “What would Tarrent do?”

“I’m not Tarrent, who ruled easily,” she bites and then sighs. “But I remember a conversation with Tarrent about a spell that forces every witch in the city to conjure their magic and amplify my spell to protect us. I don’t know how long it will last or if I will even be able to cast a spell that strong.”

I lock my eyes with hers. “I can sense your power, and it is as strong as your brothers. In fact, I’d say stronger. Don’t hold back. Don’t let your demons win, and kill that bitch for us all.”

Her smile is wicked. “When did you get so bloodthirsty?”

I grin back. “When Arawn royally pissed me off.”

Brenainn chuckles low. “I like her. Tarrent is a lucky male.”

I meet his gaze. “He is, but I am luckier. Right, so we have a plan of sorts.”

“Tarrent is a good lord, and I don’t want to take the throne from him,” Devika admits. “It feels wrong.”

“He is in no position to take the throne right now, and your people need a ruler that isn’t going to completely destroy them. Sallette is going to burn this world down with Arawn,” I warn her. “She is brutal and in love with Arawn. The two don’t mix well, and the witches cannot be toys for her to play with when she is in a mood.”

“There are already many, many deaths to prove she is unstable. One of her first acts was to kill the council and their families,” Brenainn informs me, and I flinch. He looks to Devika. “And there’s only you left who can save us from this fate. We serve you already, Lady Devika, and will go to our deaths. Our gods will protect you with our bodies and the souls of the fallen as you fight and rise.”

Devika gives him a shaky nod. “My only concern is that she is powerful. Very powerful.”

I flash her a secretive smile. “It’s not her power. It’s my mate’s that she stole, and I’m going to shatter her necklace, take back the power, and claim it as my own. Then it’s your turn.”

“Arawn is going to be so angry when he finds out you’re not locked away,” Devika muses with her own dark smile.

“He made me,” I breathe out. “He shaped me in vengeance and pain and everything bad in the world, and he never thought I’d find the light in the darkness. But I did. I found the fire and threw myself into it. I saw through his lies and found love. In the end, that’s what saved me. A goddess trying to save me for love. For peace. He would never, ever see that coming.”

I glance at the flames. “He tried to leave me trapped, injured, so I couldn’t come here and be a threat to him. We are the same, he and I, but I have everything to fight for. I won’t be alone like he will be when I come for him. I will take what power Sallette has stolen from Dray, because it is mine. I’m going to save my mates, and I’m going to get them far out of here to heal before we end Arawn and finish this.”

Brenainn puts his hand on her back. “I’m going to see if any word is back from the wolves and find the stray wolf who is missing.”

She nods and they stare at each other for a second too long. I look between them, arching an eyebrow at Devika when he’s left the tent. “Am I missing something? Is there something between you two?”

She blows out a breath. “He’s a good friend. Who I fuck... sometimes. It’s complicated.”

I don’t know if Jesper will take it well, but it’s not his place to stop her from having a lover. He doesn’t seem all that interested, anyway. In fact, I think it was a giant mistake bringing him here.

Hopefully, he’ll just stay out of the way for this final part, and then he can go back to the pack lands. Nimmy comes out of the shower room and sits down with a huff. “It took me ages to get that magical soap out of my hair. What is even in that stuff?”

I love my hair and how nice it smells, but it didn’t take long for me. It was just a flower that turned into a handful of soapy bubbles when the water touched it.

Devika laughs. “It senses how dirty your hair is and will continue to make soap until it feels it’s clean.”

Nimmy’s cheeks brighten, and I nudge her shoulder. Devika looks Nimmy over in her new leather clothes, a deep blue that matches her felt cloak. I’m wearing the same. “You look so different. Stronger, more determined than I’ve seen you before. I know it’s been a year...but a lot has changed.”

Nimmy leans her head on my arm. “This one’s a goddess. I’m strong now, and you’re about to be a damn Lady of the Witches. We’ve come a long way.”

“I honestly never thought I’d see you again,” Devika admits with a sad smile. “We didn’t have this place in the beginning, and for a while...it was bad. We were hunted by our own people but saved by some, too. Eventually, I sensed the magic of this place when an old witch told me my father

kept a secret here. A touch of my blood, and this place revealed itself to me. Like it was waiting. Like my father somehow knew I'd need it one day."

A shiver goes down my spine. "He likely did. Somehow."

She looks at the ground at our feet. "I hate him for abandoning us and treating his people so badly for a long time. I'm not sure how to feel about him doing something for me. For his people. I imagine he would have a fit knowing I'm going to fight for the title of Lady and become ruler. Many kill their female descendants to make sure the males rule."

"Males suck sometimes," I mutter.

"Not all of them," Nimmy reminds me, clearly thinking of one male in particular.

Devika looks between us. "Spill, Nimmy."

She smiles shyly. "I planned to come here to get my dragon, even if Serei didn't come back."

"Your dragon?" Devika questions.

"Apollon," Nimmy breathes out. "I need to tell him how I feel and make sure he is safe. It doesn't matter if he doesn't feel the same way, but I need to make sure he has a future. I know he'd come for me if it was the other way around."

"Even Devika has a lover now," I say, dropping her in it.

Nimmy gasps. "Jesper? Your mate?"

Devika almost flinches. "No. No...he didn't come after me, even knowing I was in trouble. I'm not sorry for moving on, because he's a coward, and fate was wrong. We might be fated mates and have a connection, but it's nothing to me. I couldn't ever forgive him for not coming to save me. Even before that, my instinct wasn't to be with him. It never has been, and I think he felt the same."

"I'm sorry, Devika," I tell her.

She shrugs. "Witches believe choosing our mate is stronger than the bond fate gave us."

“The bodies on the spikes...you haven’t seen Apollon, have you?” Nimmy quietly asks into the silence.

“No,” Devika replies, and Nimmy all but sags in relief, like she was frightened to ask and find out the answer. “He is strong and will be fine.”

“I know,” she tightly replies, and I lean over, taking her hand. The tent opens, pouring in sunlight, and Brenainn comes in holding up a small letter with a black wolf engraved on the red seal.

“They are sending the message to distract Arawn at sundown.”

I look at Devika, seeing how nervous she is. “You can do this.”

She looks away. “For all our sakes, I hope you’re right.”

Forty-Nine



FLYING THROUGH THE COLD AIR, I loop past an old church, watching the flickering flames that spread up from the pillars into the sky, kissing my body and empowering me. My wings leave a trail of fire so bright and pure that it looks like starlight, and I look over at Devika flying near me. A broom made of a special ancient tree feeds from her power so she can fly without uttering a word. The palace looms ahead of us, just up the hill, and I look down into the buildings, seeing shadows of witches trailing us on the ground. Our army, and we are here to take this city back. The minute that the crown is taken and Devika becomes their Lady, the people will have no choice but to bow to her. Until then, they are going to try to stop us.

A line of witches circles the outskirts of the castle, and they immediately send a shield of fire our way to destroy us. I grin and catch the flames, pulling them to me before throwing them right back. The witches scream as the fire burns through them, and for a moment, I wish I didn't have to kill them outright. I don't count the witches that try to fight me off, using air, water and fire, but it's easy to stop them. Too easy... and all I can feel is the itching sensation that my mates are close and I need to get to them. Nothing and no one is going to stop me from getting to them.

I land on the massive stone balcony where I first saw the city with Tarrent...where we walked into a trap that would end up shaping me into who I am now.

And this goddess wants her mates back.

Leaving my arms at my sides, I feel for the flames within the castle, and with a click, they all go out, leaving them in darkness.

That should get her attention.

The glass doors at the end of the path slam open only moments later, shattering with the impact, and glass tumbles around Sallette's feet. Her lips curl up in surprise, and she walks to me. There are four guards behind her, and I use my flames to send them flying back into the corridor with a smash. Sallette doesn't even flinch, her heels clicking on the stone with every step.

Her long black hair falls around her shoulders and the silver princess dress she is wearing. The dress matches the glittering silver crown twisted into her hair, but she isn't what makes my heart stop. A gold chain is wrapped around her wrist, connecting her to Tarrent, who she pulls along behind her. His head is bowed, and he strains to look at me with every step. When I meet his eyes, I could fall to my knees before him. I gulp, knowing I need to push past the anger and fury burning within me and accept that he is at least alive. Alive but so pale, covered in cuts and scratches that Sallette obviously has not allowed to be healed by magic. His eyes fall on me, a mixture of wonder, shock and pain slipping into anguish as he realises what I'm here to do.

The gold chain is attached to a collar around his throat, like he's a pet, and fury builds inside me into an unseen wave about to hit this world like a meteor. She stops a few feet away, tugging hard on the chain and nearly making Tarrent stumble to his knees.

"Ah, isn't this a special threat?" Sallette purrs. "Do you like my new dog? I find him a bit annoying to break in, but I'm getting there, and maybe Arawn will let me play with you when he is done."

I snarl at her, and amusement bounces in her eyes. "Where have you been? Arawn claimed you were dead."

"He lied," I coolly reply and cock my head. "Does your lover lie to you often? How sad."

“Bitch,” she snaps and pauses, looking over my wings. “Who helped you?”

I chuckle, pulling on every flame nearby in the city. They happily answer my call, and she turns, watching in horror as her city turns dark. When she looks at me, seeing the flames dancing in my eyes, sensing my power, she rightfully takes a step back. “No one you know helped me but I’m not the weak queen you once knew. Your time is over, Sallette, and I have someone here who is going to make sure you stay dead this time.”

She shakes her head. “You’re not the only one with power.”

I laugh. “But I’m a goddess, and you are nothing.”

She grips her necklace, but it doesn’t stop me. Nothing will. Flames shatter out of my body in a wave, swirling around her, and she screams as the embers graze her skin. “This is for my dragons. This is for my mates.”

I use my flames to latch onto the necklace and burn it from around her neck. She screams, grabbing it, but it burns in her hand until the power smashes out of the necklace, and I pull it possessively to me. The full force of the power slams into my soul, and I groan in pleasure, allowing it to make itself at home alongside the rest of my power. My wings grow massively behind my back, and spirals of flames spread into the night sky around me as I walk to Sallette held in my flames. I burn the chain off her wrist, and all of it, until it gets to the collar around Tarrent’s neck and that falls in large gold chunks onto the ground. He rises on shaky legs and grabs me, pulling me into his arms. I kiss the side of his neck, breathing in his scent for only a second. I can’t allow myself more.

“Go watch the door. This is a female-only battle,” I tell him, and he kisses my head before doing as I ask. I lower the flames around Sallette as Devika drops out of the sky and nods to me, an evil grin on her lips and revenge burning in her eyes brighter than my flames.

The revengeful Lady of the Witches.

Devika throws herself at Sallette, punching her hard across the face with power lacing around her body from a spell. “That’s for my brother, and killing you is for my people. For my damned city.”

Sallette whispers her own magic, pushing her off, and I watch as Devika casts her own spell to block hers. Air, water and fire clash against each other as I walk to Tarrent.

I wrap my arm around his waist, and even with new muscle on him from fighting, I can tell how weak he is. “I knew you’d come for us.”

“Always,” I lovingly whisper. “Are you okay?”

“Now that you’re here,” he replies, turning to watch the fight with me. “I’m proud of you both.”

I smile brightly as I notice Devika is winning, pushing her magic hard against Sallette.

Sallette looks over her shoulder at me as her magic fails, and the air goes still. Hatred shines in her eyes right before Devika slams a dagger into her chest, right into her heart.

“I hope you rot in hell. I’m sure Hades and Persephone will find a special place just for a monster like you.”

The air itself seems to pause as the ancient magic of the witches rises to crown a new queen. The crown tumbles off Sallette’s head, flying into the air and slamming down on Devika’s. Sallette falls back, and I send my flames to destroy her body into nothing but ash. Just to make sure she is dead this time.

We both quietly watch as gold dust floats from Sallette’s body and into Devika’s, and she gasps with the power as all of her shines with the new magic. When she opens her eyes, she rushes over and hugs Tarrent tightly. “I’m sorry I couldn’t rescue you sooner, brother. I’m sorry I had to take the throne.”

He cups her cheek. “I’ve always seen your strength, and you deserve this, Lady Devika. I have everything I want with my mate.”

My heart warms as I look at Devika and keep my voice quiet. “We will see each other soon. Protect my dragons.”

“I will.”

Devika turns to face the city, no doubt beginning the spell as Tarrent and I turn around. “Do you know the way to the dungeons?”

“Of course,” Tarrent replies, leaning heavily on me. I try to share some of my strength with him, using my magic to search his body but sensing a block on his power. Maybe a spell of some kind. “A potion to make me weak and block most of my powers. It will wear off in a few days.”

I sigh, but I’m soon distracted by several guards running our way. I instantly send them flying away with a whip of my flames, and Tarrent quietly watches me, guiding me through doors and down stairs. We head deeper into the darkness of the castle, using my wings to light our way and warn us of any danger. Thankfully, most of the guards have left, or they have heard Devika’s call, and they know there is a new ruler.

Some of them simply don’t care and try to attack us before my flames cast them away.

“What happened to you?” Tarrent softly questions.

“It’s a long story,” I tell him. “First, we need to get Dray and Nakoa, and leave. When we have healed, then we go after Arawn and kill him once and for all.”

“When did you get so ruthless, princess?” he chuckles against my ear.

“Since the minute I thought that I’d never see you again. Since when I imagined never seeing any of you again because of him. I’ll be ruthless, cruel and downright unstoppable to make sure you three are safe.”

He kisses the side of my head. “I never thought I’d see you again either, but now I’m never letting you go.”

“Don’t make me cry when I need to be a badass,” I mutter with a grin.

He laughs and, damn, I missed that sound.

As we go down another set of stairs, I look at Tarrent. “Have you seen Dray or Nakoa?”

He straightens a tad. “Yes. Sometimes she’d drag me down to watch them both be tortured. Dray had it worse because he wouldn’t bow to them. He is strong.”

Sickness rises in my throat, and it takes a lot not to throw up on the spot. I’m so glad that bitch is dead. Eventually, we get to the dungeons where four guards stand before the doors. They don’t even get a second to cast their spells before I’m slamming them into the wall with a pillar of flames, knocking them all out. I burn down the wooden door and leave ash around my feet as we head inside. Tarrent guides me down five levels before we make our way through another door and to a row of prisons. The smell is dreadful, and there are definitely dead people in here, but I don’t pause as we go past four empty cells, and finally I feel Dray close. My heart beats fast in my chest as I step into the light and look into the cage, expecting to find Dray alone.

But he isn’t.

Arawn stands over a shadow of a male on his knees, and I can’t see Dray in the darkness. Arawn, though, looks a little shocked. The bastard looks more smug than usual in an expensive cloak and suit, all black and fitted.

He darkly laughs as he pulls up Dray’s head with a clump of his hair, and Dray groans, cutting into my heart. “Let my mate go.”

“I don’t think so, goddess,” Arawn replies dryly. “That’s the difference between us. Both of us are gods, but I don’t have three weaknesses tied to my soul.”

I meet his dark eyes. “What you see as weakness is my strength.”

“Run,” Dray groans, and my chest feels tight as I finally let my flames spread so I can see him. He is wrapped in thick black chains, all the way from his neck to his arms and his legs. His hair is longer and dirty, and I can barely see his golden skin from the cuts and bruises. Four marks where the

swords were slammed into him are easy to see, and they haven't been healed well.

"I won't leave my king," I breathe out. "Because I know he wouldn't ever leave me."

Tarrent steps away from me, standing strong, and I get the feeling he is going to try to fight Arawn even in his state. "No, go and find Nakoa. I can handle Arawn."

"Oh, can you now, little wolf?" he laughs, tugging on Dray harder. "Looks to me that you can't even keep your family in line."

"What are you talking about?" I growl.

"A wolf came to speak to me only an hour ago," he explains, and I believe I already know where this is going. "Seems like he wants his own pack, and his family doesn't quite believe in him. Of course, I do."

He clicks his fingers, and a portal made of black flames appears in the room. Jesper walks through it, and I try to contain my anger and the deep betrayal. "Coward."

Jesper doesn't even flinch, but he crosses his arms and shrugs a shoulder. "I did what I needed to do for my pack."

"You don't have a pack after this!"

"I'm not talking about your mother and her alphas. They were never my pack. She took me from my pack lands where I would have been alpha one day, and assumed everything would all be okay. Yes, your father was rough on me, but it was to shape me to be strong. He took me out of that awful foster home and cared for me. Mai just abandoned me, left me there to go and find her mates and have her happily ever after. I'm sorry it had to be you that suffers for this, but I knew you'd never support me."

I shake my head, keeping an eye on Arawn, who looks amused. "That's not what happened. I know the true story. She told me everything. It wasn't her fault, but it was my father's. He took her from you back then, and still, she made sure her alphas went after you. Despite what it cost her. She was rejected by her alpha, by her supposed fated mate, and he

nearly killed her. How can you blame her for that? How can you be so selfish to think of yourself in that situation? You still had a roof over your head and people who cared about you.”

Jesper just looks away from me to Arawn. “Kill her and be done with it.”

I straighten my back. “Why don’t you try yourself, Jesper, or are you scared of what a real alpha might do to you?”

My growl makes his head bend down, even when he fights and kicks out. I keep pressing the dominance of my wolf his way until he is on his knees.

Arawn laughs deeply and claps his hand on his side. “Wolves are annoying creatures.”

He lets Dray fall to the ground, and I lunge for him, quickly burning the many, many chains. I look back just to see Arawn grab Jesper by the back of his neck and make him look up. “Thank you for the information, but if you aren’t alpha, you were never getting a pack. You’re weak and now completely useless.”

Jesper screams only once before he is burnt into dust by black flames, and I scream. “NO!”

Arawn laughs deeply and jumps for me, clearly done with all of this. I make a shield of flames between us, and he battles against them, pushing hard, and I push right back. I need to burn all the chains. Dray looks up at me, cupping my cheek. “Run and leave me here.”

“No.” I hold on for as long as I can before I let go of the shield when the last chain is gone, and I jump into Arawn, punching him hard in the face, and my wolf howls. My hands light up with flames as I slam them into his face, into his neck, and he slams me away with a lash of black fires. I meet his fires as I skid to a stop, and our fires slam into each other, pushing and pulling, our strength too equally matched.

“How did you get free?” Arawn roars over the flames just as Tarrent and Nakoa come into the room, both of them holding each other. Relief spills through me as I hold my hand

out and make a portal of fire appear by Dray. He is pulled right in, and I nod to the portal before facing Arawn.

“Seems your old lover saw more of the future than she ever told you.”

His roar echoes off the walls, and I use his moment of anger against him as Tarrent and Nakoa get through the portal. I slam all of my power, every inch of the flames I took from the city, into the room, and he smashes through the prison walls. I run and jump through the portal, smashing into the sand at my feet. Without pausing or having a second to look at my mates, I make a second portal and rush to Dray. Nakoa goes to his other side, our eyes meeting for a second before we both pick him up and carry him to the second portal. Tarrent goes through first, and we follow, barely able to hold up Dray’s weight as we fall through the flames. This time, we land in a forest full of dark trees, and I instinctively close the portal, leaving us in darkness. I fall to the ground with my mates, all of us curled up together, and I let out every hidden emotion with the first tear that falls down my cheek.

We might be down... but we endure the fall and rise in the ashes.

Fifty



I SHIFT BACK from my wolf form after circling the area looking for clues to where we are or if we are in any danger. Thankfully, I've only picked up on wolf scents, and nothing is recent. I pick up my clothes and carefully pull them on, looking at my mates. Nakoa is tending to some of the many, many bleeding wounds on Dray's chest with what is left of his shirt, cut into rags. With his lack of shirt, I notice how much more muscle he has put on and how many bruises are on his back. I hate to even think about what caused those. His hair is cut very short, and it does suit him, but I think I would want Nakoa even if he had no hair. Out of all my mates, Nakoa is in the best condition after escaping, thanks to his healing. But Dray, who should be healing faster, is still unconscious. We need a healer, and I'm not sure how to find one around here.

Nakoa tightens a rag around a nasty cut on Dray's shoulder. The whole time, Dray is barely awake, mumbling under his breath. I go and kneel at his side and stroke my hand down his cheek, feeling how burning hot he is...like a fever. I wasn't sure he could even get a fever. Nakoa, who is still weak himself, still manages to smile at me. "Something is stopping his natural healing, Serei."

I blow out a ragged breath. "I'm not even sure where we are, and I can't find people. Maybe that's a good thing, but..."

"He needs a healer," Tarrent states what we all know. I glance at him where he's leaning against a tree, with barely enough strength to stand.

“There’s a building up ahead, and it is boarded up tight. We should focus on getting somewhere safe and indoors,” I suggest, because it’s all I have right now. I can’t risk sending a message for help or using the fire portals just in case Arawn is waiting for me to do just that. We are sitting ducks, and I refuse to believe we went through all that for Arawn to find us now or for us to die from the injuries he left us with.

“Let’s hope there is some old food or I can go hunting,” Nakoa states, his eyes drifting between me and Dray. I know they didn’t like each other for a good period of time, but Nakoa looks worried about Dray, and every inch of me is screaming to save my mate from the poison I can sense in his body. I knew it was too easy. Arawn would never let me escape with my happily ever after.

“When my powers come back, I can heal him,” Tarrent frustratedly tells us. “But right now, I’m useless.”

I walk over and wrap my arms around his chest, my skin lighting up everywhere he touches me as he holds me back and rests his head on top of mine. “You’re not, Tarrent. You’re mine and I am very, very happy that you’re alive. Powers or not, it doesn’t matter. We might be down in the dirt, but we have each other, and we will climb out together.”

He sighs and tightens his grip. “I’m guessing you’re not so mad about me not telling you about our mate bond.”

“No,” I mutter with a small smile. “And even though I was shocked, I was happy. I never wanted you out of my life, Tarrent. When I thought I’d never see you again, any of you three, I knew I wouldn’t want to be alive without you.”

“Why don’t you explain everything on the way to this house?” Tarrent muses, letting me go. He tilts my chin up so I meet his blue eyes. “By the way, I don’t feel like I’m living unless I’m with you too, princess.”

My heart beats up a racket as we stare at each other, and I softly smile. Nakoa clears his throat. “Some help with Dray would be good. We need to move.”

Tarrent kisses my forehead, and my eyes fill with tears for a moment before I watch Nakoa and Tarrent get Dray to his feet, and they all but drag him up between them.

I walk at Nakoa's side as we head further into the woods, down what I'm sure used to be an old path, but it's covered with branches and leaves and the odd stone we have to avoid. I carefully explain everything that happened to me in the time we have been apart, and they both listen, taking it all in. Including my new status as a goddess and my power that goes with it.

"It seems we owe the goddess everything," Tarrent finally says.

I nod. "She sacrificed herself for a chance for us to have a better future. I think she knew she created a monster with Arawn, and this is her way of fixing her mistake."

I glance at Nakoa. "Tell me what happened to you."

He tugs Dray's arm tighter on his shoulder with a grunt. "Arawn wanted the dragons in exchange for wolves he had captured and for them to leave the pack lands. We all agreed to go to him, against your mother's wishes. It was for nothing, anyway. He killed all the wolves that we went to save and took us all. Not before making us watch them die."

I gulp. "You have to see that you stopped him from killing the entire pack lands and all the innocents there."

He doesn't reply, and the shadows in his eyes seem darker. "Arawn made it clear we all bow to him, call him our king, or we would suffer until we do. You know what our answer was. What it would always be."

"No," I whisper. "They're my people, and they only have one king."

"Salette was our overseer, making up cruel spells to torture us while she had us working down in her mines, chipping out special minerals to help with potions and spells. We worked all day and night, using our fires to melt the stones into perfect formations. Every now and again, she'd come and

choose one of us, and we never saw them again. Didn't take much to understand where they'd gone."

I place my hand on his arm, feeling him shaking. "I saw one of them, and before I left, I sent my power out and burned what was left of them, sending them to the flames for peace."

His voice is hoarse. "Thank you."

Tears burn in my eyes. "Do you know how many were taken in the end?"

"I counted eleven, but there were so many of us down there in different areas, so I'm not sure," he replies, and we go silent for a while, no words acceptable for what we have lost.

"Did you see Apollon?" I ask quietly as we near the building.

"Yes," he replies fondly. "He worked nearby me and he's okay, the last I saw."

"My sister will care for them, with healers trained to help their recovery," Tarrent tells him. "The witches' city has the best healers and spells."

"Nimmy is there too. She will take care of the dragons as well as Devika," I add in.

Nakoa nods, but I know he feels what I do...the longing to make sure they are okay. I'm their queen, and I hate that I have to leave them for even a second. "We have our mate back, and we are safe for now. I dreamed of this day."

"So did I, brother," Tarrent sincerely replies. The two look at each other and nod, an understanding between them that warms my chest. They've always been the strong ones in comparison to me, and I don't like how our "normal" seems to be reversed. Eventually, we get to the building and stop outside as I search for anyone nearby, but I only find a few foxes, a rabbit, and two mice. Leaving Nakoa's side, I head to the door, which has a large padlock on a chain closing it and wooden planks nailed across the door. I burn the lock off the door and the planks next, leaving a large faded white wooden door. It's a towering building with at least three levels, at the edge of what looks like a huge city with a river running down

the middle. The entire city is easy to see from up here, and most of it is burnt down and destroyed. A large portion of the forest is surrounding it too, but not up here. I have absolutely no idea where this is, but it looks forgotten. Vines crawl up the building and over the boarded-up windows, cracking the white stone.

The door opens easily enough, and we head inside to a large entrance room with sofas and a fireplace loaded with wood and piles of wood next to the fireplace. I click my fingers, lighting the massive fireplace in the centre of the room. There are several worn down couches facing it, and a big grey fur rug lies in the middle. It's dusty in here, but soon it will be warm and cosy, and most importantly, it's better than the middle of the forest. I leave Nakoa and Tarrent to help Dray to the couch, and judging by their own panting and generally how terrible they look, they all need to sit down. I use my flames to flick the door shut. "I'm going to have a look around."

There's a few mumbled gestures, and I know they're too exhausted to even offer to help. If they don't want to come with me to protect me from the possible spiders in the kitchen... I find a cupboard in the hallway, loaded with dusty blankets and odd plastic bottles with sweet smelling soap in them. I leave the soap but bring the blankets with me through another door, and I sigh in relief to see it's a kitchen. It's full of counters and cabinets, and there's something long past rotten in the sink that I don't look at. I search the top counters, and I'm relieved to find some tins of old human food. They look like beans and strange fish, but it doesn't matter. I gather as much as I can, including strange looking bars with the word *chocolate* on them, and head back to my mates before they worry. Tarrent and Nakoa have claimed a sofa each, and Dray is on the one nearest the fire. I hope the flames heal him. I put the blankets down on each sofa before putting the food on the floor near the fireplace and going back to the kitchen to find a saucepan to cook with.

"I can cook," Tarrent all but grunts, trying to stand up.

Turning to him, I shake my head. “Rest, please. Let me look after you just this once.”

He searches my eyes before reluctantly sitting back, and I get to work on the food. It takes me a while to open the can without a pull-tab before simply burning the lid off and cooking the red beans in red sauce. I make up bowls and hand them out before taking Dray’s over to him and frowning. I wish I could wake him up. I take his hand and press it against my lips, pushing my fire into his skin, and something pushes it right back at me with such a force I nearly stumble back. My eyes widen as I look at my king, my mate, my dragon, and I realise I don’t know what to do. A hand falls on my shoulder, and I look down at Dray, seeing his golden eyes looking up at me. My smile hurts my cheeks as I put the food down and lean over him, cupping his cheeks. “Are you okay?”

He doesn’t answer me, only whispering my name like a plea, and it breaks my heart before he drifts off back to sleep. He wakes a few more times, and I manage to feed him a few spoonfuls before he falls deep asleep, and it’s clear he isn’t going to wake up for a bit. I tuck him in with the blanket, kissing his lips just once before eating my own food. Tarrent is already fast asleep, and Nakoa opens up his blanket, so I silently push my boots off before climbing in with him. His warm body presses against mine, and I hold him tightly, breathing in every inch of his scent like a drug. “I love you, Serendipity.”

No matter how many times I’m blessed to hear him say those words, I know I will never stop wanting him to repeat them. “I love you forever, Nakoa.”

He tucks me into the space between his neck and shoulder, and I soon fall straight asleep.

When I wake up, it’s bright and sunny out, light beaming through a window where a board has fallen down, letting in the sunlight. My mates are still sleeping as I crawl out from Nakoa’s arms and make my way to the window, peeking out at the silent forest.

Thick arms wrap around me from behind, and I lean into Nakoa's familiar touch. "We should hunt. The cans won't last a day, and it's not enough for you three to get strong. My wolf can hunt, even if I've never done it before."

"I can help now, and my dragon knows how to hunt without a shift. We need water, so maybe you can search for that," he grumbles in my ear, sending shivers down my spine. "You saved us, but you're not alone."

My voice is soft but filled with venom. "I wish that bastard never laid a finger on any of you."

"He will pay," Nakoa vows.

"He will."

Nakoa kisses my cheek before breaking away from me and heading to the door. I watch him before checking on both Dray and Tarrent, concerned how deeply they are sleeping, but hoping rest is making them better. I leave the building and search around the property, luckily stumbling on a well with a metal bucket still attached, albeit rusty. It takes me three times to lower and raise the bucket before the water is clean enough to take inside after I boil it. I force Tarrent and Dray to drink some water before having some myself, just as Nakoa comes back. Five dead rabbits hang off a branch, and he hangs them on hooks on a wall. Silently, he eats the leftover beans with me and has a drink before nodding at the door. When we are both outside, he looks around. "I don't recognise this place, and I have travelled well. We need to look around, Serei."

"Agreed," I say. "I don't know why my instincts would bring me somewhere I don't know. I was thinking of my mother when I cast the fire."

He wraps his arm around my waist. "This isn't the pack."

I sigh. "No, but I trust myself. I don't think I would have brought you somewhere dangerous."

"Come on," he says, nodding to the forest. I look back at the door. "Tarrent is awake, I can hear him, and he will send an alert if we are needed. I don't sense anyone near, Serei. We won't go far."

It still doesn't feel right to leave them, but I go with Nakoa, because he is right, we need to know where we are and if there is any chance of finding a healer without having to take Dray and Tarrent to Fall Mountain Pack, where Arawn is no doubt waiting to attack. When we get to the edge of the hill, my foot hits something, and I lean down, picking up a necklace pendant. The pendant is worn down, but the words are clear as daylight. "I know where we are. The Ravensword Pack lands."

Nakoa doesn't say a word as I drop the pendant into the leaves and look over the city where my mama spent so many years of her life. Terrible, horrible years. I was born here...and that alone is the only reason I think I came back.

I hear scuffling to my left just as Nakoa casually moves in front of me, and I let my powers burn down my arms, ready for a fight. "I wish I had my weapons."

I almost chuckle at Nakoa's admission just as two wolves burst out of the trees and come to a halt. They both have bright white fur that glitters in the sunlight, and they remind me of Jesper's wolf. It still pains me to think about him. One of the wolves is a lot smaller, tiny really, compared to the other, and I realise he must be a child. It cowers behind the bigger, slender wolf, who growls. I step around Nakoa, and I growl right back, letting my power shine in my eyes. The wolf whines, bowing its head right before it shifts into a naked female on all fours. Nakoa wisely keeps his eyes up, but thankfully, most of her body is covered by her long, dark brown hair.

Her eyes are crystal blue, and she holds her hands up. "Please don't hurt us. Please, let my son go."

I don't get to say anything as she continues on. She is young, only about nineteen, if I had to guess. "We mean you no harm. We were just running. We don't expect to see strangers here; there hasn't been many in years."

I clear my throat. "I'm not going to hurt you, neither is my mate. My name is Serei, and this is Nakoa."

She looks between us warily. "Why are you here?"

“We’re looking for help,” I say, being honest. “Do you have a healer here? We are desperate. Two of my other mates are injured, and we are in danger if we try to leave here in this state.”

“You’re taking a risk telling me this,” she points out. “But I have two mates, and there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for them. So, yes, I am a healer alongside my grandmother. She taught me all I know, and anything I don’t, I’m sure to ask her.”

Hope fills my chest. “Will you help us? We can’t pay you right now, but I promise I will send gold, food, whatever you wish back when we return home.”

“I cannot simply agree to help you,” she softly explains. “There are only a hundred and five known wolves here on the island now, and we have an agreement in place when it comes to strangers. Not that there have been many. I have to speak to the elders and see what they wish.”

“So you don’t have an alpha?” I question.

Her expression tightens. “No. Alphas bring misery, and we do not follow the old laws.”

I don’t know if she is aware what I am, but I’m thankful she is so straightforward with us. The little wolf howls at me almost playfully. “I will be back shortly. Please wait here.”

She shifts back, and they run off into the trees, a blur of white fur lost in the thickness of the forest. I look at Nakoa, who is tense. “What do you think?” he asks.

He steps closer to me, linking our hands together. We both have nothing but rags and dirty clothes covering us, and to them, we will look helpless. In a sense, we are. “She could easily attack us, but I don’t think they will. She senses what I am, I think, but she didn’t run. I am concerned what the males might be like when my mama said many were evil like my father.”

“Some people pretend to be evil to hide their kindness when there is no other choice,” Nakoa muses. “We will be cautious of them.”

“Agreed,” I admit, glancing back in the forest to my other mates and sensing they are okay as can be. “I’m scared what Arawn has done to Dray can’t be undone.”

Thinking it and saying my deepest fear are two different battles that both leave my hands shaking. “We will save him. He will fight this to get back to you. We all spent the last year fighting for our lives in the hope of seeing you just one more time.”

I cup his cheek with one hand, and he strokes his fingers into my hair before he grips me tightly and pulls me into a deep, passionate kiss. I moan into the kiss, heat pooling in my lower stomach and toes curling up in my boots. I let my arms rest on the back of his neck as his tongue battles with mine, exploring and remembering. He easily picks me up, pushes me against the tree, and his hard length pushes into my stomach, making me pant for him. His hand trails down to one of my breasts, sending pleasure curling through my body. His lips leave mine to kiss down my jaw and finally to my neck.

Sadly, we’re soon interrupted by the distant sound of wolves, and Nakoia reluctantly puts me down, light burning in his eyes. I kiss him one more time before we turn to face the wolves nearing us.

Four wolves break into the clearing, one of them the female from before, but the other three, I don’t know. They’re all white wolves, two of them are smaller, and I gather they’re female. But the one who steps up first is clearly a male and, judging by the scent, the mate of the female.

He shifts quickly, revealing an slightly older male with snow white hair and brown eyes. He is taller than me, but he doesn’t look as well built as most males I know, suggesting he isn’t a warrior.

“I hear you are in need of a healer,” he states, his accent reminding me of mama. “You both look well, and we wish to know why you want a healer and where you are from.”

I quickly introduce us, but he doesn’t offer his name in return. “Our need of a healer is not for us, but my mates have been given something by witches to stop them from healing

and accessing their magic. They are weak, and we are hiding here for a short time to heal. I don't know how much of the world you know about—”

“We do not wish to know anything about the outside world,” he coolly replies, cutting me off. “All we know is strangers are not welcome, as they bring trouble. We have no interest in joining the big pack land where you are no doubt from and being ruled by corrupt alphas. Our ancestors were born here, and many were before them. Even when it was taken over by evil, it does not mean that all our people wanted the same. This is our home, our lands, and you are keeping secrets.”

I lift my head. “You're right, I am. The old alpha of this pack was my father, and I never met him. I am nothing like him, and for me, that is something I am proud of. I'm not here to claim the lands or to bring the Ravensword Pack back, but I do need help. I'm simply a wolf asking another wolf for mercy.”

The male turns back to the three wolves, and in unison, they howl. Two of them run away, and the female shifts back with a welcoming smile. “Help will be given. My mate's name is Hyde Ravensword, and I am Flare Ravensword. Is your mother Mairin?”

I nod and her smile fades. “My mother worked in the mansion under your father years ago when I was only five, and she used to sneak me into the kitchens. I remember her telling me about a female called Mairin who was chosen as the alpha's mate and he killed her.”

“Death was always my mother's friend,” I gently reply.

“But then she came back and changed everything. My mother was abused terribly, like many females there, but she survived before dying naturally years later. We are not the same as it was. Females are now honoured, and we choose our own mates. I just wanted you to understand us a little...and maybe tell Mairin that, in the end, she helped save so many of us.”

My throat clogs with emotion. “I will.”

She claps and leans back, kissing her mate before he nods at us and shifts. “It’ll be very much an honour for me to help however I can. I will need to see your mates.”

“Thank you,” I tell her. “Are you sure there isn’t anything I can send back in thanks for your help?”

“No,” she replies, looking at her mate. “We wish to remain untouched by the world, and leaving us in peace is gift enough.”

Nakoa and I look at each other before leading the way to our temporary shelter. Flare’s mate runs off into the forest, and she smiles at me. “My mate is going to the other females who have been gathering food and water and spare clothes for you. We don’t have many weapons, but if you explore the city, you are likely to find some.”

“Thank you. We didn’t expect that,” Nakoa answers.

“Being kind is a free gift and one all living creatures deserve,” she replies, twitching her nose. “Whatever creature you are.”

“Dragon,” he answers her.

Her eyes widen as she steps away a little. “Dragons are fairy tales.”

He huffs and I chuckle. “Well, the mates I’m taking you to are a dragon and the other a witch.”

She nods, her eyes still wide. Silence becomes normal as we make our way back, and she seems to be pondering everything we have said. I hope I haven’t freaked her out too much, but she isn’t running away, and that is a good sign. Nakoa goes inside the building first, and I follow after Flare and close the door behind us. Flare doesn’t need any instruction when she sees Dray first, and she rushes straight over. Her hands glow softly, a dark green light filling the room brighter than my fire, and it spreads all over my mate. The light flickers and bounces before she touches his forehead and steps back. Wordlessly, she goes to Tarrent, who is awake, and he holds up a hand before she can get near.

“I have the same issue he does. Something is blocking my healing and powers, a powerful potion. I thought it might wane, but it has not,” Tarrent explains.

“This is Flare,” I tell him, sitting at his side and taking his hand.

Flare sighs. “The counter potion will be difficult to make, and I will need blood from them both. I am sure of what this is, but I have to go back and read about it more to make the perfect potion with my grandmother. For now, my healing will give the dragon strength to eat and drink until I am back. Shout in the woods for me if anything gets worse.”

“Thank you,” I tell her.

“There are supplies outside, and more will come as the day goes on and word spreads to all the wolves about you,” Flare explains.

I follow her to the door, and we step outside, where there are baskets waiting. I place my hand on her shoulder. “I know that you are not interested in coming to the mainland, my mother’s lands, but know that she would help you if you ever need it. Especially when I tell her how much you’ve helped me. If you need help, send word to us and we will come.”

“Thank you, Serei.” She dips her head. “May I show you something before you leave? Not right now, but soon.”

“Okay,” I agree. “I would like that.”

She soon shifts and leaves, and I bring in the baskets with Nakoa, closing the door to keep the heat in. Nakoa loads the fire with more logs as I open up the basket full of cooked meats, rice, and fruits. It’s easy to make up meals, and we all eat in silence for a while. “Where did you find the healer?”

I glance at Tarrent. “I kind of brought us to my father’s old lands. Luckily, they just want us gone and are happy to heal us so we leave quicker.”

“Finally, some luck,” he grumbles. I take his plate after kissing his head as he lies back down, and Nakoa takes the rabbits to the kitchen to sort them. I try to feed Dray and make him drink, but he only has a few spoonfuls before drifting

back to sleep. I make a bucket of water up and find a cloth with the soap before I clean Dray of all the dirt and grime on him. The water is black by the time I'm done, and I hate that he barely moves the entire time.

"Fight for me, mate," I whisper, tears filling my eyes. "We can't end like this. You can't leave me yet. I need you. I love you."

He doesn't answer or wake up, but I know he can hear me.

The next few days pass in what seems a storm of activity and boredom all at the same time. Every day, we eat and drink until Dray is actually able to sit up. Flare took three days to make the antidote, and she claimed it will take at least five days for the antidote to fully work the potion out of his system and then a few more days for him to naturally heal. Tarrent must not have had such a high dosage, as he is awake and casting spells, while Nakoa has searched the city and brought back a box full of weapons. Typical dragon, finding the treasure no matter where we are.

I run my brush through Dray's hair, and he catches my hand, pressing his lips to my palm, and heat spreads through me. "Sometimes it doesn't feel like you're really here."

"I am," I breathe out, leaning closer and kissing him. He groans and cups the back of my neck, tugging me into a deeper kiss, but I soon break it, feeling how weak he is. "Rest and then you can do whatever you wish to me."

"Then I'm going to fucking work hard on getting better with that promise," he vows, fire burning in his eyes. I grin, a shiver drifting down my spine at the ideas of what he will do to me.

Flare knocks once before walking in, thankfully with a dress on this time, and leaves the potions on the table. Dray and Tarrent take theirs before Tarrent goes back outside to train with Nakoa, where I should really be.

"Is it an okay time for me to show you something?" she questions. "My son is with his grandmother, and I have a rare spare hour."

I smile at her. “Sure.”

Dray grumbles, but he doesn't try to stop me as I leave with Flare after quickly telling Nakoa and Tarrent where I'm going. Nakoa drops his sword and comes to my side and arches an eyebrow at me when I look at him. Flare doesn't seem to mind him joining us. It's about an hour walk into the city before we start going around burnt down buildings and small patches of overgrown forests until we finally come to a building made of stone, in the shape of a star. It looks like a gallery of sorts, with signs outside and a path made for a queue. There are large, broken glass doors at the front, and I imagine this place was once very beautiful. Flare leads us to the broken doors and opens them up, and I use my flames to light up little spheres of fire to float around the room. Flare's eyes widen in shock, and she stays near the door in fear, I'd guess. “You're more than a wolf.”

“I'm the goddess of the flames, and a wolf, too. I'm also the queen of the dragons,” I answer her. “And I am confused why we are here.”

She nervously clears her throat as I glance at the rows of massive paintings of males I don't know. There is a necklace on a pedestal in the middle of the room, with a wolf's pendant made out of pure gold.

“I don't know if you've ever seen this room, but I suppose you didn't. This is your family history and every one of your ancestors. We wanted to destroy it years ago, as we do not honour those who inflicted such harm, but it wasn't our place, so we let it be forgotten on its own. The necklace is an heirloom, kept for decades by the family of alphas. It's all that is left of them except you. They were proud of it. It was given to them by the gods, apparently,” she explains. “But this place is yours. I thought you should see it.”

Nakoa looks down at me. “Do you recognise which one is your father?”

I glance at the painting nearest the door, and I know it's him. I walk to the painting, looking up at the evil creature who sired me. “I wanted to know you once, before I learnt what

you did and who you were. Now, I simply hope you're looking up from hell, screaming as I do this."

Nakoa moves to the door, knowing exactly what I'm going to do. I let my flames explode out of me with a vengeance for my mama, for everything she went through. I make sure even hell sees my flames as they devour the room.

I walk out when there is nothing but fire, to where Nakoa and Flare are waiting. I place my hand out in front of her and make a flame appear in my palm. I shape it into a bracelet of eternal flames and let it float onto Flare's wrist. "A gift. A thank-you."

She touches the bracelet of flames and smiles brightly at me. "It's a shame you don't want to stay. Maybe having an alpha isn't the burden we think it is. I think we could learn from you as our alpha."

I look back at the flames. "There will never be a Ravensword alpha again."

I smile as I walk away, my fingers linked with Nakoa's. I only wish my mum was here to see the last heirloom of the Ravensword alpha burn into nothing. To watch the last painting of his face burn into ash and for the old Ravensword Pack to be over.

Fifty-One



“I FOUND SOMETHING.”

I glance up at Tarrent from the pages of my book and smile. Dray is sleeping on the couch behind me, but he actually got up and stormed around, double-checking everything was secure before nearly falling over. I convinced him to get some more rest, and his replying growl only made me smile. I missed his snarky nature. Tarrent offers me his hand, and I take it, letting him pull me up. I put the book down as he leads me to the stairs. “What were you reading?”

“Wolf history, according to the Ravensword Pack. It’s a bunch of lies,” I tell him. “Propaganda at its finest.”

He leads me down the stairs to the basement levels, and I frown. “There’s nothing down here but a concrete room.”

He flashes me a secretive smile. “Trust me, princess?”

“Always,” I reply with a smile. “With my life.”

He wraps his arm around my waist, tugging me to his side as we come out into the concrete room. On the other side is a door hidden behind piles of old, empty boxes that have been pushed to the side. I feel excited as I scent running water, and I step through the door first, humid heat pressing into my body. “Wow.”

In front of me is a secret cavern pool with bubbling hot water, and on the edges are dozens of chests, some of them open and spilling over with gold coins and jewellery. No wonder they hid this place. Tarrent closes the door and walks

behind me, his lips hovering over my ear. Heat burns through my body as he whispers, "It's really deep." He kisses my neck before adding, "And hot." A shiver runs through me as he breathes, "Get in with me."

"Okay," I whisper back. He undoes the buttons on my borrowed shirt until it falls to the ground at my feet. Tarrent kneels behind me, his knuckles softly grazing down my back until he finds my underwear and slowly, teasingly tugs them down, before I step out of them. Without looking back, I walk and jump headfirst into the water. The water is hot and soothing as I sink into it, looking around at all the rising bubbles. Just as I break the surface, Tarrent dives in, splashing me with water. I laugh right before his hand wraps around my ankle and he tugs me underwater. I open my eyes when I'm right in front of him, and his eyes shine brighter than the water.

I don't know who moves first, but we both crash into each other in a melting kiss, both of us burning hotter than the water. He groans as I wrap my legs around his waist, his hard cock pressing into my core, and he pulls us up out of the water and carries me to a rock. His lips descend down to my stomach, his hands squeezing my breasts before rubbing his thumbs over my nipples, making me gasp. When he is between my legs, he looks up and his lips part. "Be my mate, Serendipity Fall."

Those are some of the most beautiful words I've ever heard. "Yes, only if you'll be mine."

"I've always been yours," he vows before kissing my clit and making my back arch with pleasure. He is ruthless, kissing, tugging and sucking on my clit until I'm only seeing stars and nothing else. He pushes two fingers inside me, a masculine groan echoing around my clit when he finds how wet and tight I am for him.

"I'm going to—"

"Good girl," he replies before he takes me over the edge. All my muscles tighten up as pleasure crashes through me, and my cry echoes off the stone walls. I'm barely coming down

from the high when Tarrent climbs over me and slams home. He is big and long, filling me up, and I pant from the slight pain and intense pleasure one thrust can cause. He kisses me as he thrusts again, both of us gasping with every movement, and I barely notice the mating bond clicking into place, binding my body and soul to his, a mark burning onto my lower back as proof. He picks up speed as I begin to tighten around him, unable to stop another orgasm slamming into me, and I moan into his mouth as he roars once before coming deep within me, his hand holding my hip tightly and as every bit of seed leaves him. Breathlessly, I look up at him, kissing him once, twice, and he smiles so brightly. “My mate.”

“Yours,” I gently reply, feeling him still hard inside me. He smirks as he whispers some words, and we begin to float in the air. He stays inside me as he runs his hand down my body, over my hard nipples, which peak for him again, and to my clit. He begins to rub my clit slowly, with his cock still hard in me and his magic pressing against me. He spins me in the air, so I’m on top, and he grabs my ass, leaning up and flicking his tongue against one of my nipples as he moves me up and down on his cock. “I’m fucking you for hours, Serei.”

I bite down on my lip, throwing my head back and rocking my hips. Witch sex is something I know I’ll be forever addicted to when it comes to my mate.

* * *

Crawling up on the sofa, I yawn after a long, perfect five hours with Tarrent in the pools. I thought it might be awkward when I came upstairs with him, but Dray and Nakoa only asked if I wanted to join them on a hunt. I was so happy to see Dray walking around and going out, even to hunt. He still isn’t back to his full strength, but I know it won’t be long.

Tarrent comes back into the main area and sits next to me on the couch, his hand sliding to my new mark on my back. The mark is five stars circling a larger star in the middle, and I love it. Tarrent has his own mark over his chest, which is now covered by his shirt. He passes me a plate full of various

foods, and I nibble on the cheese just as Devika appears in the room, in what is almost a window to wherever she is. I pause mid-bite and she laughs. “I hope I’m not interrupting the new mates.”

“How did you know?” I ask, putting my food down.

She laughs. “My brother looks too damn smug and happy. Congratulations.”

Tarrent kisses the side of my head. “I wish we could come and see you, sister. How are things?”

She tenses for a moment. “Ok. Arawn’s creatures are constantly attacking our borders, but the shield is holding, and the scholars believe we will have months left before it falls.”

“Hold tight. You won’t need months,” I promise her, and she nods. “How are my dragons?”

Her eyes soften. “Injured, tired, and stubborn as hell about accepting our help. I had to tell them you commanded them to let us help.”

“Good idea,” I say with a smile. “Thank you for looking after them. They needed the help.”

“How are you all?” she asks next.

Tarrent leans back, his hand stroking my hair. “Healing but getting there. We found a healer, and we are safe for now.”

Someone calls Devika, and she looks back. “One moment.” She sighs. “You didn’t tell me being Lady meant dealing with a million problems all day long. I swear another meeting might kill me.”

Tarrent grumbles with a laugh. “You’re Lady of the Witches. Tell them to delegate unless it’s urgent.”

She thinks about it and nods. “Good idea. I need sleep.”

“I miss you, sister,” Tarrent tells her.

“Me too,” she admits. “But this is better than seeing you in chains. Call for me if you need help, and we will come. No matter how far.”

“We will,” I promise, and the magic disappears into glittering dust that falls on the rug. Tarrent tucks me into the blanket, and we lie down just as I yawn again. “Would it be selfish to admit part of me wants to stay here forever with you three?”

“No,” he softly replies. “But we will never be the rulers who take the straightforward route, or we will not deserve to rule.”

I sink into his arms. “When this is over...maybe we can find time for just us four. Somewhere quiet.”

“We will find time,” he vows into the darkness. “I know a goddess I can pray to, and she might listen.”

I giggle around another yawn as he tucks me in closer with the blanket, and soon I’m drifting off to sleep.

“What the fuck is it?” a voice shouts. No, not a voice. Nakoa. I wake up at the same time as Tarrent, and I sit up, relief filling my chest when I see Achilles lying on the rug, his legs in the air as Nakoa stands over him with a sword. Achilles doesn’t even open his eyes as he snores.

“Wait!” I shout, climbing off the sofa. “He is my...friend. Don’t hurt him.”

Nakoa lowers his weapon just as Dray walks in. He pauses at the sight of Achilles before laughing deeply and walking over. He strokes his belly, and Achilles purrs like a cat. “It’s good to see you again, old friend.”

“Mnemosyne sent him to help,” I tell Dray, and he straightens before picking me up off the sofa and carrying me to his sofa. He lies down, pulling me on top of him and tugging the blanket over him.

“Hey!” Tarrent bellows in annoyance.

“You’ve had our mate all day. She is mine now,” Dray growls right back, and I curl into his big arms, lying my head on his chest.

Tarrent doesn’t seem impressed, but he lies back down, and Nakoa goes to his own sofa. Within seconds, I fall into a

deeper sleep than I have in a long time, with my mates safe and my strange pet on the rug.

Fifty-Two



“WE SHOULD LEAVE TOMORROW.”

Looking up at Dray, I see how firmly set he is in this new plan as he sits down next to me, the old couch sinking with the weight of my dragon mate. The room smells like cooked meat from our dinner of deer and sweet orange from the handmade juice I just finished off. I’m sitting between him and Nakoa, my legs curled up. A part of me is just sad to leave this sanctuary my mates and I have found here. It has been nice, just us three, no arguments for once. We planned to stay for another week, to make sure everyone is healed completely, but it’s clear Dray has had enough healing and waiting. Tarrent leans back on the other couch, spreading his arms over the back. “Then we need a solid plan. He will have some fucked up trick waiting for us no matter what we do.”

“I think we should go to my mother’s pack. At least we will be able to defend ourselves if it’s more than just him,” I suggest.

“The creatures he makes,” Nakoa muses, and I nod. There is no way he isn’t bringing an army of them to fight us. “Our fire can destroy them, but it depends how many he created.”

Tarrent tenses. “Salette used to get angry when Arawn spent a great deal of weeks with his creatures. There could be hundreds of thousands for all we know.”

“Likely more,” Dray warns. “He won’t face us without an army.”

I clear my throat. “This time, it’s different. I was sent back here to destroy him, and I will do anything, I mean anything, to achieve that. We are even, for once, in terms of power.”

“And you are not alone like him,” Dray growls with shadows in his eyes that I wish he would let me help with. He has been a closed book since he has gotten better, and Nakoa believes he is just afraid of losing me again. Arawn won, and we all suffered for it, but I think Dray suffered the most. But I’ll be here, waiting for when he wants to talk. We haven’t talked about what he went through at all like the others, and I don’t think he’s ready to tell me yet. He’s much older than I am, hundreds of years older, and I don’t know if this is not the first time he’s been tortured, but I imagine it’s not. I don’t think he wants to scare me with the truth. But I saw enough of the truth down there to be furious at Arawn and want him dead for it. For that and so many things. That’s why I could never stay here, as happy as we are, when he is out there alive. Dray wraps his arm around my waist, near enough pushing Nakoa out of the way. Nakoa huffs and pulls my legs onto his lap and begins to rub my feet.

Possessive males.

“We have some weapons, enough to defend ourselves, but we can always shift,” Nakoa suggests.

“The pack would fight. The angels there too,” I remind them. “I wish our dragons could come and join in the fight as their fire would help, but I don’t think they are well enough.”

We sit in silence. “We should leave tomorrow, before sunrise.”

“First, I want to give something back to you,” I say to Dray, who looks downright confused. I climb on top of him until my knees are on either side, and his lips twitch with a smirk.

“You’re always welcome to give this to me.”

I chuckle even though my cheeks burn. I didn’t completely think this through as Nakoa lightly growls, and I glance at Tarrent, who is still. This might push the boundaries of their

jealousy, but at the same time, I want us all to live together in peace. Jealousy doesn't have a place in that future.

I place my hands on either side of his face and close my eyes. It doesn't take much to release some of my power into my palms and push it from my soul to his, not when we are mates. Dray's eyes widen as he realises what I'm doing, and he wraps his hands around my wrists. "This is your power, Serei."

"No, it's ours," I whisper back. "And I took this back for you. You gave up so much to stop Arawn with this power. It was never mine. Let me return it to you."

His gold eyes search mine before he nods once. "I love you."

"I'll always love you too, my king," I vow before closing my eyes and opening the barrier to my power. Flames burst out of my skin and around Dray until we are in a sphere of fire that we can't see out of. I hear Nakoa and Tarrent swear and jump out of the way as the fire burns away our clothes so nothing is between us.

Dray's hands fall to my hips as gold power flickers in the air like literal gold, hovering between us, each a drop of incredible power. The power slams harshly into his chest, all the gold dust attacking him in one go, and he growls with intense pleasure, a long breath escaping his lips. I watch, almost dazzled, as I know exactly how it feels to feel power like this. I press my lips to his to taste his pleasure, and he groans, kissing me back just as passionately, holding me just as tightly. The flames fade away, and I blush, ducking into Dray's neck, and he laughs.

Tarrent sighs and sits on the other sofa. "You lot need fireproof clothes."

"I had some," Dray grumbles, his eyes flickering over me. "But I'd always forget to share them with my mate so I get this view."

"Bastard," I playfully hit his arm and climb off his lap. Dray stands up off the burnt and ruined sofa, not giving a

monkey's ass about his very hard cock being on show.

Nakoa throws a blanket at him and gently hands me one as I cover myself up and go to sit next to Tarrent. Nakoa sits on the sofa while Dray goes to the stairs and heads up, my eyes glued to his back the entire time.

"I'm going to get dressed," I tell Nakoa and Tarrent.

"We should double-check the weapons and clean up before we leave," Tarrent suggests with a stretch.

I smile as they begin chatting away like they have been friends for years, and I go up the stone stairs with worn patches of cream carpet in the middle. I find Dray in the first bedroom, and he's already pulled on trousers and is sitting on the edge of the bed, unfolding a grey shirt the right way around. He looks up for a moment as I walk in and close the door behind me. Wordlessly, I drop the blanket and go to the baskets, finding my cleaned leather clothes and pulling them on, aware of the dragon watching me. I finish by clipping on my thigh strap and sliding the worn silver daggers in.

"We can talk, you know, about what happened with Arawn. I know what happened to Nakoa, and I know what happened to Tarrent, but I only saw a bit with you. I know whatever it was is bad, but I'm here if you want to talk about it," I blurt out, turning to face him. He finishes pulling on his shirt before rising up and walking to me.

I step back and he pins me to the wall with his body, his fists digging into the stone by my head. "You don't want to know what he did, because I couldn't stand knowing what he did to you."

Sadness makes my heartbeat slow to a dull thud. "But I'd listen to you. Even I could feel nothing but fury at the end. You're my mate, my partner, and I'm here for you. I know you need to talk to me, so stop pushing me away, treating me like a child, and let me help."

Dray searches my eyes. When he finally talks, his voice is hoarse. "He tortured me. But you know what was worse than

the torture? What I will struggle to forget, struggle to sleep without seeing and feeling again and again?”

“What?” I whisper.

“The worst torture was him telling me over and over again how he raped and killed you. How he left you in the middle of nowhere, broken and used. He described it over and over in detail, enjoying my pain far more than the beatings and cuts or drownings. Sometimes I knew he was lying, but sometimes through the pain and exhaustion, I didn’t know whether he was telling me the truth or not. I searched for that bond in the darkness, and you always felt so far away that I didn’t know whether death had taken you from me. In those moments, I wanted to die to be with you.”

Tears fall down my cheeks as he continues. “I didn’t want to know if it was true. The rape...if he did that and I couldn’t save you from it... I couldn’t stop him from hurting you.”

“It wasn’t true,” I hoarsely promise, and relief makes his whole body sag. “I’m sorry you went through that. I wish I could change it all.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he demands, cupping the back of my neck, pulling me to him. “He is the only one that will be sorry. I wouldn’t change anything if it meant there was a chance of changing this, jeopardising what we have. You are alive and well...and with me. I’d pay that price over and over.”

“I don’t deserve you, Dray.”

“I owe you everything,” he murmurs. “I’ve been a jealous, possessive bastard, and I pushed you away being like that. My dragon doesn’t like to share, and you are my most treasured thing in this world. But I realised in that time apart, that it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter to me if you have a thousand mates, even though I’d be very jealous and try to kill them. I will take any part of you that you will give me. I can see you love them, and we might not know each other well, but they are your mates and my family for that reason. They both sacrificed everything, and there were times when they got me water and food and got beaten severely for it.”

“We’re a strange pack, and you have no idea how good it is to hear you accept them,” I admit. “I love you all equally, in slightly different ways, but equal.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m not going to be a possessive bastard at times,” he grumbles.

I chuckle, a massive smile on my lips. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

He kisses me softly, pressing me into the wall for a second. “We will win, and when this is over, I want to build the most beautiful city for us to live in. For all of us to live in.”

“I love that. The city of the dragons. This time it won’t be a closed city, and it will be open to the rest of the world. There’ll be more than dragons living within our city, as I’m not just the queen of the dragons, and I’m never pretending to be anything less than I am.”

He kisses my forehead. “We will all be free.”

I smile into his neck. “I can almost imagine it, when the dragons finally find their mates and the city is full of children’s laughter and babies’ newborn cries as we cheer. We should have a tradition that means every time a dragon baby is born, we set off flames into the sky above the city in honour of the flames dragons came from.”

“It’s perfect,” he agrees. “Do you ever think about having children?”

He runs his hand down between my breasts and to my stomach. “Birth control hasn’t been on our minds, and the witch could have gotten you pregnant even now. A primal part of me just wants to fuck you right now and pray you do get pregnant.”

I feel butterflies in my stomach as he carries on. “When I was in the dungeons, I thought about it, seeing you again and our future over and over again. Sometimes I felt like I was even glimpsing into the future. Some kind of magic appearing just to give me hope. I used to see you holding our baby in your arms as our people celebrate.”

“Boy or girl?” I ask, hope burning in my heart for that future.

He smirks. “Definitely a girl. One born to rule.”

“To answer your question, I can’t wait to have children with you, Tarrent and Nako. For us to build a new city and have a future of peace.”

He kisses me one more time, soft and gentle, taking his time with me before pulling away, and he takes a deep breath. I know he has become my fierce mate, the dragon warrior king I fell for. Who saved me against all the odds and hoped for me when everything seemed the worst. I make sure I shift my own gaze into his strong queen when he looks back at me. I was once a small spark of embers that’s been coaxed into a fire. A fire that’s going to rid this world of darkness once and for all.

Fifty-Three



“READY?” Dray asks me as I step out of the building and pull the door shut behind me. I’m going to miss this place in my own way, or just the time I had with my mates alone. There was a vulnerability that drew us all together and made my mates allies and I dare even say friends here. I mated with Tarrent here, and for us, I know none of us will forget this place. I have left a note for Flare, saying goodbye and thanking her. I doubt we ever see each other again, but for some reason, my powers brought me here because they knew I’d be safe with the people from my father’s pack. They weren’t all villains, and that has given me the closure I think I needed from my past. And for that, I am thankful. I won’t be back; a deep part of me knows it.

I look at my mates, so very different from when we first arrived, all of them dressed for battle in the best clothes and armour we have. Each of them has been training, preparing, and looking so strong now, like when we all went to start this war with Arawn, assuming we wouldn’t be tricked and lose at the first and second hurdle. Third time’s the charm, or so I’ve heard from Aunt Reine. By the fires, I miss her. It’s only been two weeks since we crashed here, unaware even where we were but in desperate need of help. But we picked ourselves up, and we certainly aren’t crashing back down again. Arawn isn’t winning this time. He has created me in the flames, and I’m about to burn him down.

I smile and walk over to them before casting a fire portal straight onto the courtyard of the Fall Mountain Pack. There’s

a line of shimmering magic around the entrance to the portal. “I’m ready. The shield won’t harm you unless you mean harm to the alphas.”

Dray grumbles. “Your parents need to teach me this trick. I want one of those around our city.”

“Our city?” Tarrent questions.

“Yes. You and Nakoa can be our royal consorts, if you want?” I ask them what I’ve been thinking about. “But titles aside, in terms of power, I’d like us to be equal.”

Nakoa bows his head. “An honour.”

Tarrent looks between us, and his eyes soften. “I accept. I cannot wait for you to see what I can build with my powers.”

“It better not be a bigger building than what I build,” Dray firmly states.

Tarrent wickedly smiles. “Well, of course it will. Like other things, I’m the—”

My cheeks are burning as I catch onto where this is going, and with a roll of my eyes, I walk into the portal and step out into the courtyard. My mates follow behind me alongside Achilles as he flies into the air and disappears into shadows once more. Tarrent looks at where he was and blinks a few times. “I am not going to get used to your invisible pet anytime soon.”

“I like him,” I say with a grin as I close the portal behind me with the snap of white flames. “We best go and tell them we are here.”

We make our way into the castle, and just as I get through the door, the whole castle shakes along with the ground. I run back out to the courtyard and look over the rest of the city, but I can’t see what caused that. Using my wings, I fly high into the air so I can see around and pause in horror. Arawn was waiting for us to come back. The bastard. The whole city is surrounded by vile, horrible creatures, so many of them they look like a black wave of goo with sharp teeth and claws. Some of them even resemble wolves, but most look like a mix between a dragon and a rat. They swarm around the pack

lands, and the angels have retreated within the barrier as the creatures crash against it, making everything shake. Something makes me look up to the hill in the far distance where a figure of a male in a cloak stands. We lock eyes with each other, and even from this distance, I know him.

Arawn.

He stands alone, protected by a few creatures, but his eyes meet mine, even this far across the city. He smugly smiles before lashing out with his black flames at the shield, making it shake and crack under his flames. I fly back down and land with my mates. “It’s Arawn. There must be a hundred thousand creatures out there, and they will swarm the city.”

Mama and Reine push through my mates to slam into me, hugging me tightly between them. Mama kisses my head. “I was so worried.”

“We have more than us to worry about. I’ve brought trouble, and I’m sorry,” I say.

Mama shakes her head. “That bastard attacked you. Our princess. Your trouble is ours, too.”

“She means we will fight with you,” Aunt Reine says with a vicious smile. “What’s your plan?”

“Dragons,” I say, looking at my mates. “And as much fire as you can get. It destroys them.”

Aunt Reine steps away with Valentine and Ragnar wordlessly going with her. “I’ll pass the word around. Good to have you back.”

They all shift and run off as the ground shakes once more. “Where is Jesper?”

I go still, and Mama’s face drops. “He betrayed us to Arawn, and he nearly got us killed.”

“What?” she whispers, her eyes wide, and I can feel her heartbreak. “No. He wouldn’t.”

Silas and Henderson step to her side, placing their hands on her shoulders in comfort, but she doesn’t let go of my hands even as tears fall down her cheeks. “Why?”

“He wanted the Ravensword Pack. The alpha position he might have been one day. Arawn no doubt promised him that, and when it came to Arawn keeping his promise, he saw Jesper wasn’t an alpha, and he killed him. I tried to stop it, but I just couldn’t. I’m sorry.”

She is silent for a moment, her eyes flashing green. “You shouldn’t have tried to stop it. He betrayed us, and I should have seen it. I trusted him with my daughter.”

I wrap my arms around her. “Maybe too much of him was corrupted by my father and there was nothing anyone could do about that in the end. I believe old Ravensword wolves here were encouraging him, unhappy in the pack.”

“We will deal with them,” Silas vows, and I don’t doubt it.

The ground shakes again, and Dray steps to my side. “The shield is falling. We need to shift and fight.”

“Be safe,” I ask him, stepping away from my mum.

He tilts my chin up. “Don’t go after Arawn alone.”

I nod and he kisses me once, looking at Nakoa. Nakoa winks at me before running next to Dray, both of them shifting into magnificent dragons, and they take to the sky in a flash of red and gold scales.

Tarrent comes to my side and links our fingers as Mama comes back. “We are going to lead the fight and defend the edges. Be careful.”

“I will,” I promise. “And the Fall Mountain Pack will not fall today.”

“We endure the fall,” she tells me, each word filled with power. “And rise in the ashes.”

The words have power, and I feel them as she steps back and shifts into her beautiful wolf, and her mates shift, too.

They barrel off down the road, and Breelyn runs across the courtyard. “Send any children, unarmed females, males, and elders to the courtyard. The castle will help us keep them safe.”

“We will,” I promise her before she goes back inside to the children I can hear crying. Achilles crashes down on the ground in front of us, and he shakes his fur out before looking at Tarrent and howling once.

“I think he wants you to ride him,” I say with a chuckle at Tarrent’s horror. “I can fly, but you’d need a strong spell, and you’d be slower than us.”

He glares at us both. “No.”

“See you soon, then,” I tease, taking a step back, and he growls at me, making me smile. With a dramatic sigh, he climbs on Achilles’s back, and he looks so odd between Achilles’s wings. He bounds into the air, and Tarrent shouts something as Achilles twists from side to side. I take off with my wings, staying close to their side as we fly to the edge of the city where a big portion of the shield has fallen and creatures are climbing through.

The army of wolves and angels at the front are fighting with everything they have got, but the creatures are getting past them, into the rows of houses. It takes seconds before the screams echo, and I know I won’t ever forget the horrible sound. Dray and Nakoa are across on the other side, burning lines of creatures while battling the flying ones.

Worst of all, Arawn has vanished from the top of the hill, and I try not to think too much about that as I hear a child scream in terror below me.

I land just inside what looks like a playground with at least six children all huddled together in the middle of a climbing frame. Two dead females and two dead shifted wolves are nearby. I know they tried to save the children. *Old gods, look after them.* I’m getting revenge. The creature here is slender with small wings and the body of a wolf mixed with rat legs. It’s digging its claws into the metal frame, pulling it apart to get to the children.

I throw a sphere of flames at its back, and it roars in pain, turning away from the children. I put a finger to my lips, asking them to be quiet for a moment. The creature, with empty black eyes and a rotten smell, faces me and roars again

before barrelling at me. I grin, spreading fire completely over my body and slamming my fist hard into its face as it crashes off me into the air and slams into the ground. It rolls to the side, and I land on it, grabbing it around the neck with my hand and burning it with my white fire. It tries to climb up, but magic holds it down, and I look up to see Tarrent holding his hand out, a spell whispering from his lips.

It takes me a few minutes to completely burn it to pieces before I step away from the melted, awful smelling goo. It sticks to my feet as I run to the climbing frame and step inside.

“I’m Serendipity Fall and I’m here to help. Come on out, it’s safe,” I promise.

A few whispers of fear hover around them as I help them all climb out of the broken frame without getting hurt before climbing out myself. Achilles comes bouncing over, and a few of them scream.

“No, no, this is my kind friend Achilles. He won’t harm you,” I tell their scared faces. “Look at me.” They all listen to my command with wide eyes. “You are wolves and you need to be brave, but most importantly, believe me. I’m the princess of the wolves and an alpha, and you can trust me to make sure you are safe.”

They look between each other before the biggest child, a male about ten years old, steps forward. “Achilles?”

“Yes,” I answer, walking him over. I stroke Achilles’s side and he purrs, making the kid smile. “Can you ride with him around the city to help others while I fight out there?”

“I can do that,” he says, puffing out his tiny chest.

“Good,” I reply and stroke Achilles. “Take the children to the courtyard and then come back with the boy. Look for children to help.”

Achilles yelps his agreement, and the boy ushers the children over. They all get on, except one girl, who looks about five, and she points at the dead wolves. “What about our teachers? We came to see the full moon and learn our howls.”

I lean down and touch her cheek before picking her up, my heart hurting. “They are with the gods now and happy and free wolves. Be brave for them.”

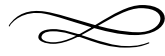
She cries as I put her on Achilles, and the children all hold on to each other tightly. He barrels into the sky, less rocky than he did with Tarrent. We look at each other and nod once before running to the nearby houses, many of them on fire with creatures tearing the bricks apart.

Tarrent begins to cast spells on the left side, and I take the right, using the flames around me to wrap around three of the creatures’ legs and pull them through the air. I slam them hard onto the ground and make my flames into a massive dragon mouth before snapping them shut around the creatures with a bang.

I take a step to find more when a hand shoves into my chest and I fall back, straight through a portal and onto the grass. I look up as Arawn steps through the portal.

“SEREI!” Tarrent shouts as the portal snaps shut.

Fifty-Four



“FALLING FOR THE SAME TRICK,
Serendipity. How predictable you are.”

I dig my nails into the grass as I stand up to face him. We are back on the hill, looking over Fall Mountain Pack. The exact same place that he beat me last time, and an image of Dray with all those swords in his chest flashes into my mind, feeding my anger as a growl escapes me. I want to call for my mates, but I know the city needs them right now, and I can buy some time by simply keeping Arawn talking. About his favourite thing: himself.

“Using the same trick, how predictable,” I respond with a smile, slamming a wave of fire into him, and he stumbles back, just about defending himself with a blast of his own power. “But now you’re all alone, and I’m certain you’re not going to like my new plan to murder you.”

He tuts, lowering his arms, and his black flames fade away as I hear a growl. I don’t turn, but I sense three massive creatures—dragon-like, I bet—behind me. They move around us, one in each corner, and I remember these ones that attacked the city. Well, their counterparts. “I kept my favourite pets just for you.”

“How kind,” I reply flatly, a little worry entering my chest like a knife.

He looks me over. “Or you can come to my side and help me burn this world down.”

“Why would I ever do that?” I bite.

He crosses his arms, walking closer, and I step back. We circle each other, and I watch him carefully. “We are friends.”

“We may have been friends once, but that was when you were pretending and manipulating me. I see right through you now,” I snap in anger, anger at him and also at myself for falling for it. I have forgiven myself for most of it, but there will always be a small part of me that won’t completely heal from what he did. “You were never my friend because you can’t be one. You aren’t capable of putting others first, loving them unconditionally, or even caring deeply about anything. Using me was the only power you ever had, and now that is gone. I will stop you burning this world down.”

He sighs, an almost cocky smile on his face. “I never wanted you as my friend, Serei, but I never wanted you dead. Didn’t I prove that by leaving you alive last time?”

“You trapped me,” I remind him.

He tilts his head to the side. “I locked you up, like the female you were meant to be. You were born to be powerful and to breed powerful heirs for me. I’ll take you away again and make sure you don’t escape this time. I’ll spend years drawing out that monster that lurks under your skin in your blood. The one your father bred into you. It’s in your blood, just as it was in his. In years to come, you will sit at my feet, my willing pet.”

“I am not my father’s daughter,” I coldly state. “But I am my mother’s, and she always defeats her enemies.”

“You really do believe you stand a chance, don’t you?” he asks with a laugh that echoes eerily around us. “We are born into our fates. I was born to darkness and so were you. That’s why you will be the one I keep, breed and care for. We are the same.”

Disgust burns in my throat. “Honestly, you truly have real fucked up issues.”

His eyes narrow, and I slip out my daggers from my thighs. “But your time is over. You don’t get to rule anymore.”

He stops circling at the same time I do, both of us facing each other, one of his creatures breathing down my neck. “Are you going to stop me, little wolf?”

He lifts his hands, black flames lance out of his palms, spiralling in the air and slamming into the dome of fire I create around me. The creatures bang their bodies against my fire, and I grit my teeth, holding tightly to the magic.

Suddenly the fire stops and the creatures back off. I wait a minute before carefully lowering my dome of fire, finding Arawn looking down the hill at the pack lands.

“Your lands are being destroyed. The wolves are screaming. When your mother’s pack falls, the witches will be next, and I will make them suffer,” he muses his plan out loud. “Serendipity, in time, you will forget they ever existed. I will make sure of that. I want you as mine. You’ve always been mine.”

“My soul belongs to my mates, and I’d rather die than let you touch me,” I coldly reply. “I’m sure even your lovers feel the same. Did you care when Sallette died? Or how about Mnemosyne? She hated you so much she used the last of her magic to save me so I could kill you. Do any of your lovers actually give a shit about you?”

“They meant nothing,” he replies, but his voice betrays him. I’ve hit a nerve.

“Mnemosyne regretted making you and did all this so Draycian could survive. She chose him over you. You really were the dragon who was never loved by anyone. What a sad way to die,” I snap.

He sneers at me, and once, that might have scared me but not anymore. “I don’t need to be loved when I crave death.”

I’m forced to follow his gaze as he holds his hand out and hundreds of thousands more creatures appear out of nowhere and join the already considerable amounts. My heart seizes in my chest as they slam into the city, breaking the barrier completely and flooding it like a wave of black. The screams

amplify, and I take a step forward on instinct as Arawn looks back at me. “I love their screams.”

“You’re a sick bastard!” I shout. “Stop it!”

He laughs just as a glint of something catches my eye from behind the pack lands. Just like the creatures appeared out of nowhere, my dragons do too. Glittering red-scaled dragons look like arrows flying directly to the city, and on their backs are witches. Hundreds of witches. They charge the creatures with their fire, and the creatures’ howls echo louder now.

“Do you like your creatures’ screams too?”

He turns to me, anger seething in his eyes. “Bitch. Even if they kill them, I’ll make more, but I’m done with you. You die tonight, Queen Fucking Serendipity Fall, and then I’ll be the winner.”

I call for my mates, knowing they can come now. “The only one dying tonight is you.”

He lashes out with a smack of black fire, but before the flames can get to me, a flash of gold fire slams into it. My two dragons land on either side of me, Tarrent jumping off Nakoa to my side.

Arawn doesn’t even blink before he shifts into his dragon made purely of black flames like I’ve never seen. It’s the same size as Draycian’s dragon, and I duck as the two of them smack into each other with a bang that shakes the ground before flying up in the air in a fit of claws and teeth. Nakoa and Tarrent take on the creatures that are near, and I take on one of my own in front of me. I run and jump, using my fire to make steps into the sky before I crash down on the creature, my daggers aimed right at his eyes, and I hit home with a thud. It roars and shakes, but I hold on, sending flames down the daggers and into its horrible body. Eventually it collapses and I let go, rolling to a stop and looking up. The dragons are still clawing away, but Dray’s right wing has taken a hit, and Arawn’s black flames are matched with Dray’s gold fire. My heart is in my throat as they both crash into each other, so loud it sounds like thunder, while the dark clouds above only make it worse.

Soft rain begins to fall on us as Arawn growls loudly, and Dray growls back even louder.

They slam into each other again, Dray clawing Arawn's side and Arawn digging his teeth into Dray's shoulder, and I'm not sure who is winning. I feel as helpless as last time, but I'm not helpless now.

I'm a damn goddess of the flames, and if Arawn can change himself into a dragon made of black flames...maybe I can. Without thinking too much on it, I jump into the air and cover myself in white flames before I shift, thinking only of a beautiful dragon made of white flames. Shifting into my wolf has always been as easy as breathing, but into a dragon? All I feel is fire. My dragon made of white flames bursts out of me, and I spread out my long wings before barrelling up in the air, my dragon instinctively going to protect our mate. The air and rain does nothing to my flames as I slam into Arawn, knocking him off Draycian, and he spins in the air before facing me. Dray looks mildly surprised in his dragon form before our eyes meet, and I swear he smirks.

We both face Arawn, and I blow out a breath of white flame, Dray's golden flames meeting with mine and swirling round. Arawn can't escape the hit, and when they surround him, he roars in agony. I fly fast to Arawn, using his pain as a distraction, and dive above. He doesn't see me as I slam down into him, and he flies in the air, correcting his course, but Dray slams into him, and he is knocked hard enough to crack the ground as he lands in a puff of dust, dirt and grass.

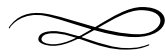
We both land as Nako's dragon tail slams down on Arawn's chest, holding him in place, and Tarrent jumps with his sword—no, Draycian's golden sword—and in one swoop swings it hard down on Arawn's neck, with magic enough to cut his head off.

Lightning lights up the sky as we all pause and look at each other. Dray's dragon huffs, plunging forward, and he lifts his head to bellow out a roar before blasting his fire over Arawn's body. Bye, you bastard.

I lower my side, and Tarrent takes the hint, climbing onto my back, and Nakoia comes to my side, nudging me playfully. I nudge him back before we both run and dive off the hill to join the fight in the pack lands that is nearly over thanks to the dragons. Dray joins me on my other side within moments.

When our dragons see us coming, no sound in the world is louder than their roars for their queen and king.

Fifty-Five



“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” the little girl I’m holding asks, deepening her grip on the blue male’s shirt I’m wearing that I threw on with a pair of leggings I was offered that are a touch too big, but they will do. I glance at the frightened girl, her body lightly shaking, and I stroke my hand down her back, over her little pink dress. Her older sister is walking to my side, and she looks up at me for the answer, too.

“We’re going to find somewhere for you to rest and be safe. Did my friend Achilles bring you here?”

She doesn’t answer, but her dark-haired sister does. “He’s your friend? He saved us and ate one of the creatures who attacked us before it killed us all.”

“Where are your parents?” I gently question as we round another corner in the castle, this part filled with bookcases and each case crammed with books.

She shrugs with tears in her eyes. “They went to fight, and we were with my aunt...but the—the—the creature killed her.”

I place my hand on her shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

The girl, who still hasn’t told me her name in all the confusion, only nods and looks away with a cracked sob escaping her throat. I think back to when I met her and her sister in the courtyard after I shifted and got changed the best I could. They were huddling in a corner, terrified, as Achilles left for the skies once more and searched for more children. There wasn’t time for any of us to celebrate as Dray went to his men, Tarrent got called away, and Nakoa was still in the

skies with some other dragons, finishing off the odd creature that was running away. The time for celebrations will be when everyone is healed and the pack lands are rebuilding themselves.

Since then, I've barely seen my mates or my mum or any of the other alphas in the hustle of getting the children I found, all six of them in the end, to the healers, then the kitchen for food to calm them down before hunting for beds, as so many of them looked exhausted. I just finished helping four of the children into a spare room, putting them in the four beds we found and leaving a flame orb burning for some light before leaving. These two, on the other hand, didn't want to stay and get some sleep, so I'm not sure what to do with them.

A door opens in front of us to a new corridor, and I swear the house is actually trying to help me, opening doors and leading me somewhere. Another door opens on its own, and I walk in, finding two beds with four different people trying to rest on them. The girl in my arms squeals and climbs off me, and her older sister is already running across the room. The two of them crash into the dark-haired couple of wolves on the bed, and they hold them in shock.

"Mama," the little girl cries as her mum kisses their heads, and their dad just holds them.

The mother looks up with tear-stained cheeks and then bows her head. "Thank you, princess. We thought they were gone. Thank you so much."

"You're the dragon princess?" the older girl whispers in shock, and I wipe a tear away before nodding with a smile.

"I didn't do much. They were very brave, and it was my honour to help them find you," I answer. "But I must go. There are others who need help."

"May the gods be with you," the mother says, bowing her head again, and this time they all do. I leave them alone, closing the door behind me.

I touch the stone wall. "Thank you for the guidance."

I feel a little silly talking to a castle wall, but as a gentle wind, which shouldn't be possible down here, whips past me in almost a caress, I know I'm not.

I smile to myself as I blow out a tired breath and rub my eyes before going in search of the next person to help. Even if my legs feel like jelly, I'm not tired enough to collapse and sleep on the cold ground yet. I'm sure I'm not far from it, though.

I round a corner, coming to a set of stairs and face-to-face with Nimmy. She looks up, her cheeks covered in dirt and black-creature blood, and her tattered clothes look as bad as mine do. But as her eyes meet mine, we both move, and I wrap my arms around her tightly, even with the nearly unconscious male holding to her side.

"I was so worried until I saw your dragon form, and I knew it was you. Then I heard the dragons' roars of victory," she tells me as I let go and go to the other side of the male, holding him up the best I can. "The creatures, it was like they sensed they had lost, and most of them ran. It was easier for the dragons to kill them then, because they were out of the houses and in the streets, away from people."

I lower my voice. "Any idea of the death count?"

She shakes her head. "I saw at least two dragons taken down, but the witches, with their healing, were there before they could be killed. They healed so many wolves, dragons, and angels. I doubt it will be that high. Devika was leading the witches into group healing, which blanketed over our people as they fought. It was incredible, and Devika was the perfect queen, and they followed her without question. They admire her."

I sigh in relief, focusing on carrying the male down the stairs and into the main part of the castle swarming with people. I knew Devika had it in her, and I think Tarrent knew it before I did, too.

"Did you find Apollon?" I ask. "I need some more happy news to keep me awake."

She nods, her cheeks red. “Yes, but then we didn’t have much time between healing him, emptying the dungeons, and coming here. Devika called everyone into action quickly, knowing it was a waiting game, but then she came to me. She said she had a dream of a fire goddess telling her to fly on the dragons over the seas to the pack lands, with every witch that could be spared.”

My heart freezes. It wasn’t my mum who sent for the dragons...it was Mnemosyne, helping us one last time. Nimmy doesn’t notice as tears roll down my cheeks, and I send a silent thank you to the goddess for saving me, saving our people, one last time. “Was that you?”

“No,” I whisper with a gulp. “But it was a friend. She is gone now.”

Nimmy nods, a little confused as we plod on down the corridor, stepping over sleeping wolves and people. “He’s dead, right?”

“Yes,” I firmly tell her, and her eyes flash with victory, the same feeling that is in my chest now and in my mates’, too. We help the injured male into a spare bed, ensuring a healer’s going around the room, before leaving him there, knowing he will be okay now.

“There was another male in the courtyard, but I couldn’t carry them both,” she tells me. “I can deal with him alone if you want to rest?”

“No, I’m okay for now,” I softly tell her, watching as she touches her head and winces. Her blood on her fingers flashes in the light.

“Are you hurt?” I ask, stepping forward. I touch her arm just slightly, letting my magic spread into her and washing over the cuts, healing several bruises on her ribs that I find too. I nearly collapse from doing that, and Nimmy shakes her head at me, tugging me in for a hug.

“You shouldn’t have done that, but thank you,” she mutters. “You are going to rest because I don’t want to be the

reason your scary mates get mad when they see how tired you are.”

I sigh. “Let’s just go and check the courtyard first. I’m really okay for another minute or so.”

She huffs but doesn’t tell me no, one of the reasons I love her, and we go to the stairs. We have to step aside as a bunch of wolves come rushing down, children on their backs and a few injured too. I look up at the goddess statue I’m near and frown for a moment, remembering that Dray and I still have this power. I wonder if it will affect our future. Will we live longer than others? Will we be targeted for this power? I have to believe that it isn’t that simple, and my mate bonds will make sure we live out a life together. When the wolves have passed, we climb the stairs and head out into the courtyard.

“Rest here,” Nimmy demands, her eyes flashing with her wolf, and I nod. I don’t have the energy to argue with her, and I choose to lean on the wall. Pleased with her bossy attitude working, she brushes several locks of her curly red hair out of her eyes, and for a moment, we smile at each other. “I never thought we’d get here. To have this chance of a future...back when we met. I never knew that the gods had sent me my best friend, my queen, and every ray of light there could be to beam into my life.”

I lean over and take her hand. “I think we met for a reason, Nimmy. I needed a friend, a true, honest friend. I don’t know if you’ve heard of it, but female alpha wolves can have omegas bonded to them. I wondered if you’d be mine? You can think about it and le—”

“I know what an omega is. It would be my pleasure and honour, as I will serve you to my death either way. My queen.” She bows her head, and I grin, throwing my arms around her tightly. We both cry a little, not in sadness but in joy, in friendship and the peace we have worked damn hard for. Eventually we let go, and I lean back on the wall, nodding to her to go, and I watch as she heads into the courtyard.

Bells begin to ring out from the pack lands, and I don’t know the sound or why, but the peaceful noise sings in the

end. Of the war. Of life. Who knows, but the sound is beautiful as Nimmy walks across the courtyard, rain lightly falling from the sky to pitter on the ground.

A dragon roar echoes around us, and Nimmy goes still, right in the middle of the courtyard. I look up to see the outline of a dragon in the storm cloud above, right before it dives and lands in the courtyard, flapping its powerful wings before shifting back.

Apollon stands naked in the rain, and I make sure to keep my eyes on Nimmy as he throws on the trousers he must have carried with him. Nimmy doesn't even pause as she runs to him, noting the cuts and blood washing away in the rain, and it feels like only a second before she crashes into his chest with a sob, her arms looping around his neck, her head buried in his shoulder and his buried in her neck, breathing her in. My own breath hitches with emotion as he holds her back just as fiercely, just as tightly, like neither of them ever wants to let go. I don't want to watch their moment, but I feel glued to the spot, hidden in the shadows of the archway.

Time seems to slow as he leans down and kisses her. First, she's so shocked she doesn't move, but then she kisses him back, and I want to jump and cheer for them. An arm wraps around my waist, pulling me against a hard chest.

"Didn't know you were a peeping little dragon," Dray whispers into my ear. "By the way, when you shifted for the first time and I saw you, it was fucking hot."

"I've always had a thing for dragons...it turns out I can shift into one too," I murmur, leaning into his touch, and his lips skate across the tip of my ear.

I focus back on Nimmy and Apollon, just as Apollon goes down on his knees in front of Nimmy, taking her hands in his. The rain doesn't stop pouring, but I know neither of them even notice it. The courtyard walls amplify his voice, so it's hard not to hear his words. "I've loved you since the first moment I saw you, and I knew I shouldn't. I knew you were healing and the last thing you needed was a dragon following you around, but I couldn't help it. I knew there wasn't even a slight

possibility you'd love me, so I decided to be your protector, to be there for you, as much as I could. When I made a snap decision to speak to you in that corridor, I thought you'd tell me to get lost and never speak to me again, but you allowed me to sit near you on that bench. It felt like my entire world lit up. I was scared I'd break the bench with how quickly I sat down on it, and most of all, I feared I'd set on fire with how happy I was and that burning the bench would be even worse."

She chuckles. They both do, and I know it isn't just rain falling down their cheeks. "When you decided to take the offer to find your family, I was overjoyed that you allowed me to come with you to help. We found your amazing family, and truthfully, I love them too. They feel like my family, and they certainly greeted me with open arms. We spent every day together, and I lived for the first moment I saw you every morning, and my heart sunk every time I said good night. I love watching you cook. I love watching you learn new things in books and how you smile and laugh as you read them, like you're watching the book play out in front of you. I love watching you with your family, how it's like no time has passed. Most of all, I just love you. When I was trapped in those dungeons, it was these memories of you that kept me alive, and when you appeared, you told me that we were free, and you looked so fierce and strong. Everything I knew you could be when we first met. I thought there was no way in a million years that you'd love me too. But here I am, on my knees, hoping. Hoping to the fires themselves that you love me too, or you could do in time, because we just survived another war, and we have entire futures ahead of us, and I only want to spend mine with you."

When she replies, her voice is broken and almost a sob. "I love you too. I'm not good at grand speeches, but I knew I loved you the second you flew into the skies and left to save us all. I knew there would never be anyone but you, and I want us to have forever. I want you as my mate, my dragon, in every way we can be bonded together. I was broken when we met, and you healed the parts of me I thought could never be saved. I love you. Completely and utterly."

He kisses her, this kiss much deeper than the last, and I turn away to face my own dragon, who leans back to wipe the tears from my cheeks.

“It seems a wedding will be happening soon,” he suggests. “Hopefully, the bride doesn’t disappear into flames this time.”

I whack his chest. “It’s too soon to joke about that.”

He grins and kisses me. “Perhaps I can show you what I had planned for our wedding night instead.”

My core tightens at his words, but I shake my head. “People still need our help. I can—”

“You can’t,” he commands. “Your mother demanded I get you to rest after the battle, and I’m not one to ignore my mother-in-law’s commands.” I narrow my eyes at that bullshit, and he smirks. “Fine, but I promise to make it worth your while. We have a surprise for you.”

I might let him win this time, but I don’t plan on making a habit out of it. “We?”

He doesn’t answer me, taking my hand and leading us into the castle. I hope he means he and my mates have come to an agreement to spend tonight in the same room, like we did in the abandoned house. I loved that when we were all together, and I don’t want that to change, even when we are somewhere new and not in danger anymore. Having possessive males as mates was always a risk, I knew that, but my heart hurts at the idea of sleeping in different rooms.

We go down the stairs, past several corridors and down to another level, which is quiet. One door is slightly open, and Dray leads me in. I sense my other mates before I see them. This room is giant, like most in the castle, and there is a queen-size bed with green satin sheets, and a clawfoot bathtub at the end of it, filled with hot, steamy purple water. There is a window looking onto a waterfall, the sound gently filling the room, and the carpeted floor matches the cream walls displaying the white silhouettes of trees on the wallpaper. A massive tree fills the ceiling, this one as green as the bedding,

and little lights hover around the ceiling, making the room dim and warm.

Petals skate on the water as I look down at it, and I realise my mates are all freshly washed after the battle...except me. Nakoa and Tarrent are in black trousers, no shirts, and I can't help but admire them for a moment.

Tarrent waves his hand, locking the door behind us. "You found her then."

Dray kisses my cheek, taking my shirt off me. "I always will."

I don't say a word as they all come to me and start stripping off my clothes, gently, softly, until I'm naked between them all. Tarrent picks me up and carries me to the bath, carefully putting me down before sitting on the bed next to Nakoa.

I sigh, sinking under the water and coming back up. "Thank you. I needed this."

"It's our honour to look after you. You're our mate, and we have made an agreement between us," Nakoa starts. "One that has been a long time coming. You are our mate and our family, and families don't work unless we are all on the same page. As dragons, it's difficult to share what is our greatest treasure, but the mate bond goes above our natures. Our love for you goes above our natures."

I frown, wondering what they are talking about exactly. Dray picks up a cloth and begins to wash me down, while Tarrent works on my hair. Nakoa keeps talking. "When we each met you, we wanted you to ourselves, but that is selfish. Today, when we battled together, it made us all realise that is how we should do everything."

When Tarrent is done with my hair, the water in the bath turns to steam around me, and as the steam rises in the air, it effortlessly dries my body right before Dray picks me up and carries me to the bed. He sits me down in the middle of Nakoa and Tarrent, his gold eyes on me as he kneels. My breath hitches at the sight of them all around me, with Dray showing

any vulnerability in front of them. It's a sign of deep, never-ending trust.

“We agreed to share you. Own you. Be yours. We have fought hard and won, and now we will share our reward.”

“Yes, we will, brother,” Tarrent murmurs, and my heart beats faster at what they are implying.

“Do you agree?” Nakoa questions, running his hand down my chest, over a peaked nipple. I gasp and nod, unable to form words right at this moment. He groans before kissing me, and soon I haven't got a clue whose hands are on me, but they are touching me everywhere. Having three muscular, toned bodies pressed against me, devouring and pleasuring me, it's overwhelming in the best way. I've dreamed of this, having them all at the same time, but I didn't think it could happen when they are each so possessive. This is a dream, and I never want it to stop.

They pull me up the bed, their clothes being burnt away with my help. I moan as I look down, seeing my king pulling my legs apart and kissing down my thigh. He doesn't waste time kissing my core and running his tongue up my slit before finding the bundle of nerves that makes my back arch and swirling his tongue in a way he knows makes me not last long. When he slides two fingers in me, I'm lost to the feeling, barely holding on. Nakoa's tongue leaves my mouth, and he grabs my breast, licking and teasing my nipple while Tarrent kisses me in his place.

I scream in pleasure as an orgasm slams through me, Dray's tongue and the mixture of all my mates too much to handle. Dray chuckles against my core before pulling me down, and Nakoa growls.

“Together.”

Dray growls back, but he nods before picking me up and lying back with me straddling his lap, my face right in front of Tarrent, who's standing over Dray. He tips my chin up, and I give him a sinful smile before kissing the tip of his cock right in front of me. He groans and grips my hair, slowly sinking his cock into my mouth until I can feel him hit the back of my

throat. At the same time, Dray thrusts into me from below, and I moan around Tarrent's cock, unable to help myself.

I feel them shifting on the bed and moving me up, and seconds later, I feel Nakoa pressing against my ass before slowly pushing in, and my healing makes the pain disappear in seconds, leaving nothing but a feeling of pure pleasure of having all my mates inside me in one go. They don't hold back, working almost in sync as they thrust into me, and my orgasm makes my body shake with indescribable pleasure. Dray groans and thickens inside me, finishing right before Nakoa does seconds later.

I look up at Tarrent, who pulls me off them and throws me down on the bed. He lifts my leg and slams into me, groaning against my lips before sinking his tongue into my mouth. His magic washes over me with each thrust, brushing against my clit and my nipples, all at the same time. I cry out, tightening once more around him, and he stills, thickening and finishing hard in me. Breathlessly, he pulls out, and we all lie back, catching our breath.

I can't believe that just happened, and they didn't kill each other for it. I roll on my side, Tarrent's arm wrapping around my waist and tugging my back against his front. Dray's gold eyes meet mine, and he playfully smirks. "The witch can clean us up, and I'm ready for the next round."

By the fires...I'm damn lucky.

"I've always wondered how you fuck her. I'm impressed," Tarrent says to Dray.

He deeply laughs, and I smile at the friendliness between them all, even if it makes me blush.

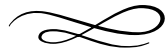
Nakoa tilts my head up and kisses me, sparking my arousal once more. "Now you can watch how I fuck her over the edge of this bed."

"Don't come right away, young dragon," Dray taunts, and I see the wicked challenge accepted in Nakoa's gaze as Tarrent's water magic washes us clean. Nakoa pulls me to the edge of

the bed, bending me over it and kissing my shoulder as his hard cock presses into my core. "Hold on."

And I do while my king and lord watch.

Fifty-Six



“YOU LOOK GREAT; relax, Nimmy. Brides shouldn’t shake from head to toe in warm weather,” Aunt Reine demands as Nimmy picks at her dress, smoothing her hands over it and looking in the mirror again and again. I can practically feel the mixture of nervous and excited energy coming off her. I finish re-lacing the side of my light pink dress that is floor-length and matches the theme of the wedding: pink and red. Nimmy looks over her shoulder at me, her eyes wide, and I try to tell her to relax. The bond between us means I can sense extreme feelings from her or if she is in trouble, and right now she is humming with nerves.

“What do you think?” she asks me, touching the mark on her arm that matches mine. It’s the omega mark, but ours is different from the one my mum has with her omegas. Ours is made of flames, curled together to make a wolf. One of the first things I did after the war, when the funerals were over and everyone was looking to rebuild, was to make her my omega. That week, we publicly announced the rebuild of the city, which was open for anyone to come and live, work, and even train with the dragons to join the royal army. Tarrent and Nakoa were officially made into our royal consorts, and they proudly took over many, many jobs that Dray and I were clueless at. For Tarrent and Nakoa, their work on building trust with other races and making trades and peace deals has been incredible. Dray and I took our thrones officially too, even if we don’t quite have a throne at the moment until it’s rebuilt. Our dragons cheered and partied all night with us, and since then, any troubles we have come across, we have worked

together to fix. The dragons all agree having four rulers is much better than one grumpy king. Not that any of them are brave enough to say it to Dray's face...except Apollon.

Sweet music plays outside, announcing the beginning of the day, of the sun rising above the pack lands. Today is special...and it marks many more special days to come for our people. There were moments not so long ago that I never thought I'd get to see this day. It feels like a lifetime ago I thought I was alone, being forced into a marriage I didn't want, and had no one to save me but Arawn. The truth was, Arawn played me for the naive girl I was, and I had so many people who loved me. Including Draycian. Including my family. They did everything to protect me and make sure I could survive, and yet I never saw that for what it was. The bells ring again, and I blink.

"You look amazing," I softly tell her, admiring her white lace wedding gown that was handmade for her and fits her curves and falls to the floor in a long train of lace.

This is the first wedding of our people since the war six months ago and the first of the dragons outside of Dray, Nakoa, and me to find their match. Nimmy's lovely red hair is curled up into a bun with several pink pearls twirled into her hair, which she told me were her mother's and her aunt saved them for this day. I know they mean a lot to her. There is a matching pearl necklace around her neck that is a wedding gift from my mates and me, and she cried for a solid ten minutes after I gave her it yesterday.

"I'm just worried," she admits, frowning but somehow looking beautiful still. I lift the veil from where it was resting and walk over to her. She bows her head so I can clip it in, and I help her sort it out as she straightens.

"Don't be. You two...well, the old gods couldn't have planned a better romance," I gently say. "He loves you and you love him. Today just makes it formal."

"On that note, I'm going to find Devika and make sure she is wearing the dress," Aunt Reine tells us, leaning over and kissing both our cheeks before heading out of the house. I

didn't see Aunt Reine much during and after the war. She went away to try to find me, and she was only halfway back by the time that she'd even heard there was an issue and I'd returned. Since then, she's barely left us alone, much to my mates' annoyance. There have been too many times when Aunt Reine has walked in before my mates could get me undressed like they planned. Sometimes, with the teasing glint in her eyes, I bet she does it on purpose.

I chuckle. "Devika doesn't like dresses, but I know she would wear one for you."

Nimmy smiles brightly and hugs me tightly in the next breath. "I heard she was checking in with the witches helping rebuild the dragon city."

"We owe them much for the help," I admit. Building an entire city, it needed the help of magic, or it would have taken us far too long. Devika and I came to an agreement for the help of the witches, and in exchange, Nakoa will train some of their army in how to use fire magic better, in the way a dragon would.

But there won't be any meetings today, because it is a celebration. I know this is a day so many of the dragons have waited to see, to hope to find their mates and show the curse is over. They deserve this. They have waited for such a long time. This house is Nimmy and Apollon's temporary home, given to us along with the entire street from the wolves. Mum didn't even need to ask. So many of them were grateful for the dragons in both the wars and were happy to help. My mates and I have moved into the castle for the time being, and it may be a big castle, but it feels a little too small for me and my mates, especially with the alphas and my mum always there to interrupt romantic moments.

Nimmy's voice is quiet. "It's just that the mate bond hasn't kicked in, and I was hoping it would. That he'd be mine in that sense, too."

"It will kick in. Sometimes it takes time, I believe," I tell her. "Tarrent felt the bond between us, but I didn't fully for a long time."

She pulls away and faces the mirror, stroking her arm. “We’re getting married, and that means he’s mine.”

“Yours,” I agree, understanding this is more her wolf than her expressing this feeling. “Dragons have a special way of mating with their fire. He’s probably just waiting for after the wedding. I highly doubt that he doesn’t want you as his mate and that what you two have isn’t a true mating.”

She nods, turning to me with bright eyes before coming over and hugging me once more. “Thank you for being here.”

“I’ll always be here. You’re my best friend and my omega,” I firmly reply.

“Are we hugging already? This is why I do not like weddings,” Devika exclaims in a huff, walking in wearing a dress that matches mine. The pink clashes with her black hair and dark makeup, but it still makes her beautiful and elegant somehow. I grin at her over Nimmy’s shoulder, glancing at her black wedding band on her finger. She married Sir Brenainn not long after they got back to the city when the war was over. Only Tarrent and I were invited, no one else but family, which included Brenainn’s sister. It was a small, sweet ceremony where he was made her lord consort of the witches, a lord in his own right, but everyone knows who rules truly, including Brenainn. They have both visited us a few times over the months, and Brenainn has become fast friends with my mates and my mum’s. He is a good male, and he makes Devika happy. She told me he is the only male she has ever met who makes her feel safe and fearless. Not even her brother could fully do that.

Devika makes the mistake of coming closer, and Nimmy moves like a cat, grabbing her into the hug and using her strength to make sure she can’t escape. Devika sighs and wraps her arms around us as we all laugh.

“I dislike hugs,” she mutters. “But I guess, for this one time, I’ll allow it.”

“You love it really,” I suggest, and she doesn’t reply, which answers me all on its own.

“I hope you’re ready. The streets are full of wolves, witches, dragons and angels waiting to celebrate with you,” Devika tells us. “They even threw confetti over me as I walked here.”

By her tone, I can tell that royally pissed her off. Nimmy laughs. “Way to make me more nervous.”

“Why aren’t we hosting your wedding first, again?” Devika questions me as we all let go.

“We want to be married in our home. Our city,” I explain.

Nimmy’s eyes soften and even Devika seems to smile. There’s a knock on the door, twice, and that’s our cue.

“Let’s get you a dragon, Nimue Windshire,” Devika says, stepping aside for Nimmy to go first. We both help get her train settled right as she stands in front of the door, light beaming in from the frosted glass square on the door.

For a moment, she shines as she looks back at us, tears glossing over her eyes, and she nods. “Let’s get my happily ever after. I’ve damn well earned it, even if I never deserved him.”

She opens the door as Devika hooks her arm in mine, and her long train follows behind her as she goes out into the street filled with soft music and cheering people. The street has been beautifully decorated with light canopies, shining suncatchers spinning different coloured dots across the pathway of pink petals. Thanks to my power, the sky is full of dazzling little embers spread in a line, and they look like red stars. The children in the city cheered, and they were so excited when I gave a few of them little embers of their own, which I made sure would stay warm and were never hot enough to burn them. I ended up with a line of thirty kids before I could escape yesterday. The line of embers goes directly down to the ceremony, and Nimmy hasn’t seen any of it. She looks back, tears falling down her cheeks, and she mouths, “Thank you.”

The cheering seems to echo far and wide as people throw confetti out the windows and from the side paths while children run up and down the edges, holding white kites with

red dragons painted on them. We carry on down the steps, and many people are out of their houses. Dragons with some of their new females at their sides bow to me, their eyes filled with hope. I never understood why they looked at me with so much hope when I was younger...now I do. The magnitude of it is humbling. I was always hoping for their future, and even if we lost the city and nearly everything, I wouldn't change a thing to get to this. I got to wake up in my mates' arms this morning—and every morning for the rest of our lives—and that was worth fighting for.

The walk takes about five minutes, but I get the feeling Nimmy doesn't even notice before we round a corner to a beautiful field in the middle of a forest of tall ancient trees, the river nearby. At the back of the field is an archway made of stone with two purple-leaved trees on either side that have grown roots around the stone before they stretched high into the sky. Purple leaves mix with my embers that fall around Nimmy as she pauses, and everyone stands from their seats on either side of the pathway.

Apollon is at the altar, in a black suit with a red pin of a dragon clipped to his breast pocket. If I thought Nimmy looked nervous, Apollon looks more so. Nakoa and Draycian are his best men, standing proudly at his side, and Nakoa winks at me as Draycian's eyes sinfully take in my dress, and I just know he is going to burn it off me later. We follow Nimmy down to the altar, and as soon as she is close, Apollon tugs her hand and kisses her deeply in front of everyone. We all cheer and clap, as Nimmy's cheeks burn red.

My mum, who stands behind them on the altar, clears her throat. "That is for the end of the ceremony, Apollon."

He chuckles, letting her go, and she looks dazed but very in love as she stares up at him. I go stand with Devika on the right, my eyes flickering to my mates, and Tarrent partially catches my eye as he sits in a grey suit on the front row on the left, next to Nimmy's aunt and family. He trails his eyes down me before leaning back and smirking, and I'm so flustered that I don't even hear the start of the ceremony.

“Welcome, everyone, to this very special wedding, and may the gods be with you all,” Mum says, her eyes flickering to me.

As Nimmy and Apollon say the ancient binding words to each other, I look at all the people sitting here watching and how many of them I love deeply. The alphas, my brother, my aunt, and her mate take up a row, and behind them, I can see Callahan’s wings and Breelyn at his side, their children taking up the rest of the seats. Aunt Reine, Niall and others I’ve only just begun to know fill the seats behind them. Most of the other seats are taken by Nimmy’s family and the dragons, who watch on with their own smiles.

“Now, I believe Apollon has made rings,” Mum says, and Apollon nods, pulling out two dark red bands from his pocket. Nimmy gasps, tears filling her eyes as he takes her hand.

“Forever, Nimue.”

“Forever,” she echoes as he slides the ring on her finger, and she takes his to do the same. Mum instructs them to hold their hands together before making her green, almost blinding magic bind a green ribbon around their hands tightly.

Mum’s voice carries far. “When this ribbon burns, your lives are linked for all of time.”

Apollon doesn’t take his eyes off Nimmy as he uses his fire to burn away the bind, never hurting her, and the second it’s gone, Nimmy throws herself into his arms, and he kisses her passionately. Everyone is out of their seats, cheering and clapping, and sweet bells ring across the city at the same time. Cheers and howls echo throughout the pack lands for the next few hours, which is mainly a flood of dancing, good food and some more dancing before I find myself able to escape one of my mates for a bit of peace. I chuckle, watching Draycian being distracted by Nimue’s aunt and forced to dance as I lean against a tree in the shadows, looking at everyone.

Tarrent strolls over to me, a devilish grin on his face, and offers me his hand. I sigh, unable to say no to him, and take his hand. He doesn’t lead me into the dancers, choosing to keep us here, hidden in the shadows of the trees, dancing to an

echo of music. I admire how the shadows only emphasise his high cheekbones, the curve of his lips, and his black-as-night hair.

I am a very, very lucky female.

He spins me around and pulls me back to him. “Do you miss being Lord of Witches?” I ask quietly, not wanting anyone to overhear us. We so rarely get time truly alone at the moment. I know it’s a temporary thing, but this is something I wanted us to speak about. He gave up a lot to be at my side, and I need to know if some part of him will resent me for it in the future. “We never really spoke about the city and your sister ruling.”

He gave up being lord to be my royal consort, but it’s not exactly the same. Dray is still king and I’m queen, and as much as we agree to make decisions together, it’s not like being the lord who answers to no one.

He rolls his knuckles down my spine, making me shiver. “It was a blessing, princess. I could have only been a lord or yours. I would always be torn between you and the city, and truthfully, I wouldn’t put the city first when it came down to it. I would choose you and damn my people without blinking.”

My voice is soft. “And that would have destroyed you.”

“Yes,” he whispers to me, leaning our foreheads together. “I don’t miss it, and I want the future, the city we are building on the backbone of peace and loyalty. The witches’ city was kept alive by my father, and it destroyed him. I believe he chose the city over our mother, and many died because of that. Devika...she will always put the city first. She does, even now. She has witnessed true unfairness, cruelty and evil. She came through all of that, and I believe it was to make sure her people would never suffer those things again.”

“I’m proud of you,” I admit, cupping his face. “Not many males could easily give up an entire city for their mate.”

He chuckles and kisses me softly, speaking against my lips. “For you, I’d do anything. Anything.”

We stay together for a few songs, content in each other's arms, and I hardly notice my feet aching. When the music pauses for a moment, he lowers my arms and kisses my palms. "I will distract Nakoa and Draycian so you can rest your feet."

"How did you know?" I question.

He laughs and winks at me. "I'm your mate. I notice everything about you. Take the heels off."

I shake my head, but I don't pause before chucking the shoes from hell off and walking through the grass, enjoying the softness against my feet.

A flash of green makes me look up, and in a gap in the trees, I spot my mum sitting on one of the roofs of the houses, alone and beautiful in her green sparkly dress that catches the sun. I let my wings out and fly up, landing next to her, and she barely even flinches.

She looks over at my wings and reaches a hand out. I let her touch my wings, and she stares in amazement. "They are beautiful. Like the hottest point of a flame."

I make them disappear, not wanting anyone to look up at us, and she turns back to the stunning view of the pack from up here. "I was thinking about what you told me of the Ravensword Pack lands."

"Oh?" I ask, stretching my legs out. I lean my head on her shoulder, and she wraps her arm around my back.

"At first, I was angry there was anyone claiming that pack land. The alphas were too," she admits. "But then I thought of Jesper. He wanted to be alpha, to be back there, and he was wrong, but I know many of the wolves miss the land their ancestors lived in." She sighs. "I'm going to allow the wolves who wish to leave our pack to go home, as long as no alpha rules that land and the old ways of mistreatment towards mates and females is forbidden."

I look at the sun cresting over the sky. "I understand wanting to find your way home."

"I'm glad you did," she whispers, her voice thick. "I used to dread coming to see you every year. Did you know that?"

“Why?” I ask, my voice hoarse.

“Because I had to leave,” she tells me, and my heart warms. “I loved every second I got with you, but leaving was like the gap in my heart emptying of everything that you made it feel while I was with you. I would do it all again to keep you safe, and I will forever owe Draycian for trying his best to save you. I can see it cost him dearly, even if we disagreed at times.”

I smile. “He is still a bit of a prick. It’s okay, he knows and enjoys that side of himself.”

She laughs with me, and I never want to leave this moment with her.

“Why are you up here alone, anyway? I know you’ve got four mates to keep you busy down there.”

The sun seems to light up her green eyes. “Sometimes it’s nice to sit and look at the sky and wonder how I ever got so lucky.” I nod in agreement, as I feel the same about my mates.

“I’m sharing my power with my mates,” I tell her, needing to tell someone.

“What do you mean?”

I watch the peaceful lands. “I’ve been sharing the power between my mates in the way I did with Draycian. All four of us will be equal in the end. They’re aware of it, and they will be powerful but not true gods in our own right. It means we won’t be immortal anymore; we will live our lives out. Exactly the same amount of years. A normal life.

“I don’t want my children to be born with a godly amount of power and an immortal life. I don’t want my mates to die before I do. I don’t want any of us to die first, but together instead, and this is the way we can do that. I think the power of the gods was always meant to end with me, and it feels right to do this. I know it is giving up a lot, but I watched the old gods, as did you, and immortality cost them everything. I’d rather have a simple life.”

Her eyes glisten with tears. “I’ve never been prouder of you. Perhaps, when the Wolven gods blessed our bloodline,

they knew it would end with you. They didn't seem happy, locked in that place, in wolf forms. I looked into their eyes and felt the power you have, but they looked dead of life. I believe you set them free. Like I did with my goddess."

I look at the never-ending sky. "There are no more gods to watch over us. No more gods to pray to and whisper for. It's just us."

My mum kisses the side of my head. "Finally."

Epilogue

∞

TEN YEARS LATER...

MY SCREAMS ECHO around the warm room, even when I try to hold them in, even though I know they are terrifying my mates, but by the fires, it hurts.

“So brave, my queen,” Dray murmurs in my ear, and I know if he could, he’d take the pain from me and do this himself. He strokes my hair softly, and Tarrent kisses my knee, holding my leg up. Nakoa is holding my hand tightly, looking more panicked than I’ve ever seen him.

“Breathe, my guard,” I almost chuckle.

He laughs. “I should be telling you to breathe through the pain, not the other way around.”

“Just don’t pass out, brother,” Tarrent suggests, and I hold in a grin, which soon slips away as a contraction hits hard. With every contraction, my magic is making the room hotter, the fires burning brighter, and everyone is sweating from the sheer heat of the room. For me, it seems to make me relax, and I enjoy it as I settle back.

“Do you need anything?” Mum asks, standing nearby, holding a white blanket we want our child to be wrapped in.

“No,” I manage to say before I scream again as another contraction tightens, pain lashing through my body. “I need to push.”

Delilah, a famous witch healer, looks up at me and smiles softly with her grey eyes. The moment we told everyone I was expecting, all those months ago, Devika demanded that we

meet Delilah and let her deliver the baby. Delilah delivered Devika's twins two years ago, and she vowed I'd want no one else if anything went wrong. Delilah happily moved into the guest quarters of the castle and has been invaluable during her time here, which I believe will be extended past this birth, thanks to a dragon friend of Nakoa's claiming her as his mate.

"Serei, your baby is nearly here, and you've done so well. Next contraction, I need you to push with everything you have," she commands in a strict but kind tone. "And then we'll have a new baby in this world."

I tighten my grip on my red bed sheets, the very bed this baby was conceived in with my mates. We will never know which is the father, but with all of us so closely linked with our magic, Mum suspects that the baby will be a mix of all of us. She claims it's like that with my brother, and maybe it's a gift only we will have.

Another contraction slams into me, and I scream, flames bursting into the air around the room as I push down, the pain awful. I feel my baby come out, and see Delilah rubbing the baby's back as Draycian and Tarrent help me sit up, telling me I'm okay and they are so proud of me. There's a stillness in the room for a minute, a minute that seems to stretch on forever, like the world just pauses right before my baby's cry echoes throughout the room, the most delightful sound. Nakoa leans down, helping my mum wrap the baby, as Delilah nods and steps back. A smile lifts up my face as Nakoa picks up our baby in the special white blanket that Mum gave to us as a gift. He places my baby in my arms, and the baby is so tiny, so light.

"A girl," Nakoa gasps.

Draycian leans his head next to mine, silent tears falling from him onto my cheeks. He touches her golden cheek, and Tarrent strokes her hand, the same tears falling down his face that match my own. Delilah helps me learn to breastfeed her, and it might take some time to get the grasp of that. We have all the time in the world.

She opens her tiny eyes, and they are moss green. Just like me. Just like my mum. Nakoa's hand is shaky as he rests it on my leg. "She looks just like you."

I hand our baby to Draycian while Delilah helps me with the afterbirth, and Mum helps me clean up.

"I'm so very, very proud. She is beautiful," she tells me, her hands glowing green as she heals me. "How lucky I am to have a granddaughter now."

I look over at my mates, all of them taking turns holding our daughter, and already I see how our future is going to play out. She is going to be spoilt and loved. Taught to be a ruler by Dray, taught magic by Tarrent and how to fight by Nakoa. With how hot her skin feels, I'm sure I will be teaching her how to control fire, too.

Mum looks over. "When she tries to date anyone, gods help her."

I laugh, thinking of that too. My brother has recently found his mate, half wolf, half angel who lives in the pack lands, and apparently her seven older brothers didn't take it well. My brother can hold his own, and he is in love and so damn stubborn, so none of us are worried. I'm looking forward to meeting the female my brother claims is his mate and welcoming her into our family.

Mum kisses my cheek before leaving with Delilah, both of them wishing us the best before my mates look over at me. Dray offers me his hand, our baby snuggled in his massive arm like a tiny doll. "Ready to announce her to our people?"

I nod as Nakoa helps me into a soft, dark red dressing gown, and I pull my hair out, letting it fall down my back in a wave of blonde. Thankfully, I managed to work out how to use my powers to make sure the black hair never came back.

I hear our people outside in the streets, cheering and waiting for us. They have been for the last nine months, ever since we shared the amazing news. They want to celebrate the new heir to the throne, and I might not want to share her yet, but I do want our people to know and welcome her. Tarrent

looks back, and when I nod, he opens the doors in our bedroom that lead to the massive balcony that stretches out around the top of the castle. It's great for Dray, Nakoa, and I to land on in our dragon form, and Ragnar made the floor with an unusual shiny black stone that is fire resistant and doesn't scratch.

Our city was built on what was left of the fallen mountain where we were brought up, and our castle is exactly where the old castle used to be, but now there is a statue of Mnemosyne in our throne room, as we owe so much of our future to her, and she will not be forgotten by any of us. The room below us, we call the pit, and it's Achilles's room where he is still showered with gifts from parents from the pack lands for all the children he saved, as well as females and some males he saved in the war. He keeps to himself, but I know he loves the gifts. The city itself is beautiful, and it looks like a maze of crystal red roofs and red pillar towers with everlasting flames on top of them that burn all day and night. "The city that is never dark" is what we hear very often from those who come and visit us. It took three full years to rebuild the city, and in that time, we were kept busy by Apollon and Nimmy, who conceived their daughter on their wedding night when they became mates, and by the many places Nakoa, Dray and Tarrent took me to visit around the world. I dreamed of travelling, of seeing all these places I read about, but doing it with my mates? That made it perfect.

Three long years, and the first night in the city, the cheers never stopped. We travelled for a few more years before discussing the idea of having a child. I will never forget seeing tears in Dray's eyes as he picked me up and told me it would be everything to have a child. Of course, the conceiving part of getting pregnant didn't take that long, mostly as we never stopped having sex for an entire month.

Dray hands me my baby, and I hold her close as she coos, her skin hot through the blanket. He walks to the side of the balcony and pulls a rope, ringing a bell that announces the birth of a new baby in the city. We ring the bell every time there's a new baby born, a new dragon, wolf, witch, angel or mortal. It's always a celebration for us.

But no bell has rung today. Not yet.

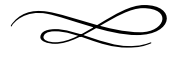
Cheers erupt across the city, flames sparkling into the sky sent by dragons from all over, and the wolves howl loud.

Tarrent asks, “So, shall we shout her name for all of them to hear?”

I grin and hold my hand out, letting embers burst across the city and carrying our voice with them. “Welcome to the world, Ember Mairin Fall.”

THE END.

Exclusive Bonus Chapter



SERENDIPITY FALL

“EMBER!”

I wince as Dray’s shout echoes around the city. What has she done now? I swear my daughter was born as a peaceful infant and within six years; she managed to turn into a terror who loves to play pranks on her dads. I mean, most of them are hilarious and I’m glad she doesn’t play the pranks on me. Ember has hair like fire, and eyes to match. When she was three, she shifted into a tiny red dragon and sometimes she can make wings of fire appear like I can, but she hadn’t flown with them yet. As for her powers, she sets things on fire all the time. We have hired instructors to help her with her magic, but all of them have quit within a week.

Mum looks over at me, pausing with a necklace from a vendor in her hand. It’s a beautiful pendant, in the shape of a flame. Blow glass makes the middle twist around in shades of orange, red and purple. “I was going to buy this flame necklace for Ember, but I suspect she might be in too much trouble to have it today.”

The vendor, a female wolf, blushes. “It’s free, alpha Mairin. I would never take money from you.”

Mum softly smiles and leaves gold on the cart before pocketing the necklace. “Then it’s a donation, not payment. Thank you.”

The vendor grins at us both, bowing once, as we walk off. “What do you think she did now?”

I rub my swollen stomach, trying to hide my smile. “I did see her in the kitchens last night and I thought I smelt Ragnar’s chilli peppers. I swear he grew them to give to Ember, knowing exactly what she would do.”

Mum rests her head on my shoulder with a chuckle as we continue to walk back to my home, my baby kicking away. The city is busy today, and with our cloaks pulled up, not many notice us on our walk. Mum comes to see me every week and we spend the day together alone. It doesn’t exactly make up for all the years we have missed, but I treasure these days and I know she does, too. “How is my brother?”

We sit down on a stone bench so I can rest. There is only a month left until the end of my pregnancy and I can’t walk for too long. I’m secretly hoping this one is a boy, so we have one of each, but my mum thinks it will be another girl. She said the goddess Persephone told her that she would have four grandchildren, all women, and all will be rulers one day. Four sounds like a lot of babies, but I’m sure she is right. “He is.... restless and none of us know why. Henderson is taking him traveling next month. Hopefully that helps.”

“What do you think is making him restless?”

She looks up at the bright sky. “Persephone hasn’t told me anything in my dreams in a long time now, but sometimes I dream of a place I’ve not seen before. A castle on an island, full of women competing in a royal test and dragons. So many dragons, none like we have here. Your brother speaks of similar dreams, but he sees someone, a girl, and he says he can’t stop dreaming of her. Do you dream of anything?”

I shake my head. She pats my knee. “Nevermind. Whatever this place is, I’m sure it will all come to light within time.”

A small red dragon flies out of my home and I grin, watching a much bigger dragon diving after her into the sky. “I’m sure it will.”

“Let’s return to the castle. I have something to show you, from my research on the old gods,” she suggests, holding out a hand. I take her hand and rise to my feet before walking

slowly to her side. We both have been researching the old gods, ones we never saw in the wars, just out of interest to know what happened to them. Why were some gods where chosen to be reborn and why others were not? “I think some gods left this world. There are records of them escaping before the rest of the gods were slaughtered.”

“Who do you think escaped?” Another world? That’s one I haven’t heard before. My mum begins telling me everything she has read about old gods more powerful than they should be allowed to be. By the end, all I can hope is that these gods found their deaths in this other world because we don’t want them back here. We are finally free of the old gods.



Thank you to everyone who helped, edited, poured me coffee or inspired this book in my mind. A special thanks to Helayna, who saved this series a million times over. The bonus epilogue links to Court of Dragons and Crowns, my new series based in the same world (s). Happy Reading!

Thank you so much for reading my story!! Lots of love, G.

xoxo

S'

Want to read Breelyn's story?



DOWNLOAD THIS FREE NOVELLA FROM BREELYN'S POINT OF VIEW BY FOLLOWING THIS LINK. [CLICK HERE.](#)

Description of bonus read



The dragon kings need a queen, and they have chosen me to compete in their race.

Four gorgeous dragon shifter kings break into my home and kill my ex-boyfriend before taking me to their world to compete to be their queen. Once every thousand years, the dragon kings come together to find human brides from Earth, and if they don't have their brides in one hundred days, their courts will lose their magic. I didn't know the world of magic and dragons existed, not until I'm thrown headfirst into it and expected to compete in a deadly competition to be one of their four brides.

Arden, Emrys, Grayson and Lysander are cruel, entitled, and I don't want anything to do with them.

In this world of glittering dresses, sharp teeth, and claws, I need to become stronger than the dragons themselves.

They want a bride—but I'll be nothing but a nightmare when I win.

This is a full-length enemies to lovers fantasy romance with dragon shifters, a badass heroine and possessive alpha males.

Perfect for fans of spicy fantasy whychoose? romance.

Court of Dragons and Crowns



“THERE’S a dragon in the sea. Can’t you see him?”

The waves brush against the stone steps, smothering the bottom two until they can’t be seen anymore as the local crazy man walks past, muttering to himself about sea dragons and magic. The cold, beautiful coastline of Silloth stretches out for miles, wrapping around a small corner of England, but it feels like it’s a million worlds apart from the rest of the busy world. It certainly is in the middle of nowhere, for me at least. The sky fills with bright, vibrant oranges and yellows that reflect across the calm blue sea as the sun sets. This is my favourite part of the day, but it fails to make me smile, to make me feel less lost and alone today. I wrap my tanned arms around my short legs, breathing in the familiar sea air, and try to forget today. It doesn’t work.

“Ellelin!”

Fuck. I knew hiding here wasn’t a good idea, as he knows it’s my secret spot, away from the visiting tourists. This is the end of the promenade, where it meets the old lighthouse. I climb to my feet, just as my boyfriend—no, ex-boyfriend as of half an hour ago—stumbles to a stop in front of me, sand spraying onto my worn boots. He’s handsome, so my grandmother says, six foot tall with blond hair and honey brown eyes. She also told me the pretty ones always, always fuck up in the end.

She was right.

“I can explain. If you’ll just listen—”

I chuckle, wiping a stray violet lock of my hair out of my eyes. Dying my black hair violet was one of the only things I've done for myself in a long time, and I love the colour. Finley said he preferred it black. "Explain what, exactly, Finley? You want to explain how you slept with a friend of mine? I don't think that needs to be explained. We're over."

I turn around and leave. I'm done with him, and this damn town I've been trapped in since I was six and my grandmother took me in. The sad truth is this is the only place I have ever known, and I don't have any friends except for my ex-boyfriend and my friend who he slept with. I don't have anyone but my grandmother, and something about that fact makes me sad. I can't remember my life before I was six, and my grandmother won't tell me anything about where I lived before that. I only know that my parents died tragically after travelling for years but that my mum was born here, in Silloth. I've been stuck here with my grandmother, my only remaining family, and I've never left.

School finishes soon, only three days away from graduating, and then I can leave. I can get out of this small town, see what the world has to offer me. My grades are high, and I've been accepted to several universities from Edinburgh to London. I just need to make my choice exactly how far I want to go from my grandmother. She still needs my help, but I'm not sure I can be here to help her without giving up the chance of leaving this town. The stubborn old lady refuses to let us have any carers in.

Finley scrambles up to my side, grabbing hold of my arm to pull me to a stop. "Let me go," I demand, loud enough to turn the heads of several people nearby. Finley looks around, noticing how many people are looking, and roughly lets me go. I shake my head and turn away, walking back to my house.

"Ellelin, please, just listen to me!"

I pause, turning back to look at him standing on the edge of the road. "Look, we were going to break up. I'm going off to university, and I'm sure not staying around here for you. Just go and live your life. We both know your life is here with your family. Just leave me the hell alone."

“But I love you,” he weakly protests.

I chuckle as I walk away. I’ve always told him not to say that to me, because I don’t believe you can fall in love at eighteen, or at least, I never felt that way about him. Love is destruction, according to my grandmother and every romance book I’ve ever read. So no thank you. I want security, a decent apartment, and money to travel the world. Not a life trapped in a small town, popping out babies with a man I don’t really care that much for as he cheats on me. That would be my life here with Finley, and I’d rather have no life than that.

I look at Finley once last time, remembering that he was charming and made me laugh once, but every one of those good memories is now tainted. “You certainly didn’t love me when you were screwing my only friend. It’s over. Leave me alone.”

Finley looks like I’ve broken his heart as I tuck my hands into my pocket to warm them up and cross the road, hoping he doesn’t follow me this time. The bitterly cold sea breeze blows against my black hoodie and leggings, reminding me I shouldn’t have left without my thicker coat this morning.

I head down the streets until I come to our small, terraced home, the street quiet and empty. All the terraces around here are a multitude of colours like a rainbow, and ours is yellow. The yellow paint now is chipped, faded, and cracked in so many places, and the windows look close to falling off, but I love this house. It’s quirky, like my grandmother, and I’ve never not felt at home here. Our house stands out in the row as every other house is freshly painted, but we don’t have the money for that, and our neighbours make sure to mention the paint every time I bump into them. One day, I’m going to have a good job and be able to repaint the house for my grandmother. One day.

Unlocking the latch, I open the door and head inside, where the warmth of the lit fire makes me sigh. “Nan, it’s me.”

I take my coat off and rub my eyes. I’m exhausted after cleaning caravans for two hours after school to give us a bit of extra money for food, as my grandmother tries her best, but

everything is expensive. Between work and school and caring for my grandmother, some days I feel like I never rest. No wonder my boyfriend cheated on me. Never have enough time to be with him—with anybody, in truth—which makes it sadder that I decided to surprise him by walking to his and sneaking in through his bedroom window today.

My grandmother doesn't reply to me, and I frown as our cat, Jinks, jumps up onto the back of the sofa. Jinks is pure white with strange red glowing eyes, but the vet swears it's normal. I swear he looks like the devil, especially in the middle of the night. I stroke the back of his head as he purrs at me for food. "Alright, Jinks."

I feed him in the small kitchen at the back of our house before going to search for my grandmother in the garden, where she usually is. The thick grey clouds above suggest it's going to rain soon, and the sun has nearly set completely. The solar fairy lights around our garden flicker to life along the path as I walk down the long stretch. The garden stretches all the way back, and my grandmother has filled it with beautiful flowers, trees, and bushes. I find my grandmother at the back of the garden, on a metal bench, wrapped in a pink knitted blanket, watching the sky above. Her sea-coloured blue eyes, the same as mine, fall on me, and her wrinkled face lights up with a loving smile. Her grey hair is messily pulled up into a bun, exotic, multicoloured flower slides clipped in, and she is barefoot even when it is a cold late summer day.

"Elle, darling. How was your day?"

I sigh, sitting next to her and crossing my boots. "Finley cheated on me with Daisy. You were right about him."

Her hand picks up mine and she pats it twice. "I don't like being right, dear. He was never good enough for you."

I lean my head on the rotting shed behind the bench. "How did you meet this one true love of your life you tell me about? How did you know you loved him?"

She sadly smiles at me, looking away after a moment. "You simply know when you meet the one who will turn your life upside down. I knew because I couldn't stand your

grandad. He was arrogant, annoying, and always two steps behind me. He drove me around the bend most of the time. But one day I realised it wasn't that I hated him, that I loved him, and I didn't want him to ever stop annoying me. We built a life together, had your mother, and we were happy until his stupid heart packed out on me. Typical. Men always leave first."

I smile at her, enjoying her story. "I don't think I ever cared about Finley all that much."

"I know, dear. That's why you are allowed to feel sorry for yourself tonight, and tomorrow you're going to face the world with a smile. He isn't worth crying over. When you meet the man that is, you won't ever be able to move on. You will just exist."

For a moment, I see her sorrow, and in a blink, she hides it. I'm all my grandmother has left now everyone else is dead, and sometimes I think I'm lucky I don't remember my parents or grandfather. I don't have to mourn them like she does. I change the subject, as I don't want to upset her. "Are you going out tonight?"

She stands up. "Of course. Dorris needs her ass kicked at bingo. If I don't go, who else would put her in her place?"

I chuckle, standing up and linking my arm through hers as we walk back to the house. "I'm going to curl up on the sofa, watch some disgustingly cheesy movie about love, and eat chocolate ice cream, because that will make me feel better."

My grandmother kisses the side of my head. "Leave some ice cream for me, dear. When I'm back, we can share and talk shit about Finley."

I laugh, breathing in how she smells like mint and garden herbs, which makes me relax. This is home and I'll miss it, but I'm ready to get out and see the world.

A few hours later, I curl up on the sofa after my grandmother has gone out and turn on the TV to search for a good movie. I just pop open the lid of my chocolate ice cream when there is a frantic banging on the front door. I groan,

putting down the tub as the banging continues. I know exactly who it is. Finley knows when my grandmother goes out to bingo, as it's usually our time alone. I unlock the door, intending to tell him to piss off, but he barges in without asking. I slam the door shut behind him.

"You're interrupting my ice cream and crappy movie. What do you want?"

Finley runs his hand through his hair, and I smell the alcohol on him. Great, he is drunk. "To talk to you. You have to give me another chance. You just have to let me fix us. I love you so much."

I roll my eyes, going back to the door to open it, but he grabs my arm to stop me. He's always been a bit grabby when he's had a drink, and considering he's twice the size of me, I can't do much as he pulls me away from the door and back into the living room. For the first time, I realise that I should not have opened the door to him. "Let me go, Finley, and go home. We can talk when you're sober."

"No," he angrily snaps, tugging me against his body. "Look, you just need to listen to me. She kissed me and then one thing led to another. I was just horny and stupid, but I love you. You have to forgive me, Elle."

I try to pull myself away from him, but his grip is iron-tight, borderline painful. "No, I don't. We can talk tomorrow, Finley. Let me go."

Instead of letting me go, his thick hand wraps around my throat as he tries to kiss me, and I panic, trying to push him away. My voice comes out frantic, and I scream, "Let me go!"

Finley doesn't listen, pushing me backwards towards the sofa, kissing my cheek and mumbling about loving me. Dread pools in my stomach as I struggle in his arms, trying to get away and fearing what will happen if I can't. Dating Finley was a big mistake, but I was never scared of him until now. I manage to lift my leg and I knee him hard, making him groan in pain and let me go. He trips on the sofa, falling to his knees and cupping his balls. "What the hell is wrong with you? Get out of my house and don't come back!"

He glances up, and the look he gives me sends chills down my spine. He's going to hurt me for that. "No, I'm going to make you listen to me. You're mine, Ellelin, and we are not breaking up!"

I back away towards the kitchen, knowing I'm going to have to leave and run. He is drunk, so I have a good chance of escaping through the garden if I run fast. At least if I scream outside, my neighbours will come and see what is happening.

I hear the back door unlock, and my shoulders sag in relief. My grandmother's back from bingo early, and maybe the shock of seeing her will make Finley leave. Finley rises to his feet as I stumble away, and he pauses, looking over my shoulder to the kitchen. All the colour leaves his face. A shocked scream rips out of my throat as a silver dagger swiftly flies past my cheek and slams into his chest, blood spraying across the carpet between us. His scream is bloodcurdling and terrible, as I freeze in shock. Red hot fire spreads out from the dagger, burning him so quickly that, within seconds, he's nothing but ash falling softly on the blood-stained carpet. The dagger falls with a thud, and my scream dies away as I turn around slowly.

My heart pounds in my chest as I face the four massive men standing in my tiny kitchen. The man in the middle lowers his hand, smiling at me through waves of shiny thick black hair as his red, fiery eyes meet mine.

"You can thank me later."

Court of Dragons and Crowns



“Y-YOU KILLED HIM?” I sputter, taking a step back in shock. I’m shaking from head to toe as the men all look between each other.

“Humans don’t like murder, dumbass,” the red-haired man says, patting the shoulder of the man who threw the dagger. He is wearing a black shirt tucked into black trousers that scream money. “Arden, you broke this one. You can deal with her. The last one bit me.”

Arden groans. “I’m not dealing with this one, Lysander. I’m already bored.”

Arden leans against the wall, picking up another dagger from his long trench coat and playing with it, throwing it up and down in the air. Lysander looks at the other two. One of them watches from the darkness of the back of the kitchen, and I can only see his outline. The other steps forward, a playful smile on his lips as locks of white hair fall into his moss green eyes, and he pushes it aside. He goes to say something when a deep voice speaks from the back of the kitchen. “She’s going to run, and then she’s my problem.”

“She’s not going to run, Grayson. Arden just saved her from whoever that fucker was,” he murmurs. “I’m Emrys. You’re Ellelin, right?”

“Boyfriend. That was my ex-boyfriend, and you just murdered him,” I croak, snapping out of my shock. “How did you do that? How did you burn him?”

Arden's laugh is deep and taunting, just like his eyes as they meet mine. "We are dragon shifter kings, babe. Fire is my skill."

"Arden, you're being a dick and scaring her," Emrys mutters, stepping closer to me with his hands in the air. He is wearing a dark blue jumper and dark jeans. For some reason, I get the feeling they don't wear clothes like this often. "He forgets humans don't know about magic and dragons. We aren't here to hurt you."

Lysander sits down on my grandmother's chair, crossing his legs at the ankle. "Just let Matron explain it all. We burnt her boyfriend to a crisp; she isn't going to believe anything else we say."

Emrys ignores him. "We're dragon kings from four courts. We're not from this world. Your world is connected to several worlds, including ours, and we can travel between."

My hands feel sweaty as I cross my arms. "What does this have to do with me?"

Lysander grins. "You've been chosen. All you need to do for now is come with us through a portal."

I lower my arms. "I'm not going anywhere with you." I step back and accidentally stand in what is left of Finley. I step aside, cringing as I rub my shoe on the carpet.

Arden laughs, the sound echoing. "She just stood on her piece of shit boyfriend. It's almost funny."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Fuck you."

He meets my gaze, running his eyes up and down over me. "Anytime, princess."

My cheeks burn as I take another step back, looking between them all, focusing on the shadow outline of the man in my kitchen. For whatever reason, he feels like he's the most dangerous of them all, and I can't even see what he looks like from here. They all look pretty dangerous, and I'm not sure how I'm going to get out of this. They're all muscular, ridiculously tall, and handsome. All I can think about now is how they just burnt my ex-boyfriend to a crisp in the middle of

my living room. How is that even possible? And now they're talking about kidnapping me.

I steel my back. They aren't taking me anywhere without a fight. "I'm not going with you. Get out of my house."

Emrys tilts his head to the side, his forest green eyes softening. "I know this is creepy and you don't trust us, but we don't want to harm you. You have been chosen to come to our world and compete in an event. This is an honour. There are several bloodlines in this world that came from ours, including yours. Your bloodline was sworn to the same magic we are bound to, allowing us to find you and bring you back to our world. Four of the chosen will become our brides. Become dragon queens. More will be explained later."

I feel delirious as I chuckle and then laugh. "I'm pretty sure I'm going mad. I must be dreaming. Going completely mad. You're kidnapping me to become your dragon queen, and I have to compete for the honour? I'm not fucking doing that. Find a girl the normal way."

"I like this one," Emrys laughs.

Arden throws a dagger at him, and swiftly he catches it midair. "I don't."

Emrys pockets the dagger before he runs his hands over his face, looking frustrated. "We are wasting time here. Let's just knock her out and go home."

"Agreed," Arden replies, leaning off the wall. I don't think, only act, as I turn and run. The front door lock melts as I run for it, so instead, I fly around the banister of the stairs, lugging my ass up the steps as fast as I can, my heart pounding.

"Arden, go after her. You freaked her out by killing someone!" Emrys demands.

"He was going to attack her! She should thank me for killing his worthless ass!" Arden all but growls.

"I will go and fix this mess," Lysander sighs, my grandmother's chair creaking, "while you two fight like children."

“Good luck!” Arden shouts while laughing.

I get to the top of the stairs, stumbling around the corner and pulling the bathroom door open, slamming it shut behind me and locking it. I don't know what use the locks are going to be against—what did they say they were? Dragon shifters? Are they actual dragons, wings, and scales and all that? No, this can't be real. No, none of this can be real. I'm going mad.

I hear Lysander's heavy feet thudding up the stairs after me. He is real, and I have to find a way to escape. I look around the room for anything. Anything at all to defend myself with. My eyes flicker to the small, frosted window. I've never climbed through it. It's thin and I'm not sure I will fit through it. Fuck it. I have to try. I start cranking it open when I hear the bathroom door handle being twisted, the door shaking. My mouth parts in surprise as clear water runs up the door from the bottom, smothering every inch of it. I don't move as the water suddenly turns to ice, the door shattering in shards of wood and ice. Lysander stands on the other side, leaning against the frame, his thick arms crossed. “Running is completely useless, Elle.”

“Don't call me that. You killed the last person who called me that!” I snap. I might have hated Finley for cheating and attacking me, but he didn't deserve to burn to death.

He raises an eyebrow. “I don't control fire, Elle. I'm the water dragon king, so you can't blame me for that one. If it matters, I agree with Arden. He deserved to die for laying a hand on a woman. I would have done far worse with him if we had more time.”

For a moment, he lets me see past the charming smile to the true darkness hidden in his soul, and it scares me. I'm not going with them. No fucking way. “Don't make us chase you. It's boring and pointless. You can't escape.”

“Fuck you!” I snap, picking up the nearest thing and throwing it at him. My nan's multi-coloured squeaky duck flies pathetically through the air, and he catches it. Lysander's lips twitch in amusement before he squeaks it once and throws

it over his shoulder. “Fine. We’ll do this the hard way if we must.”

He steps into the bathroom and reaches for me. In a split second, I look around quickly for anything and grab the top of the toilet lid, lifting it and smashing it straight across his head. He looks so surprised for a second, right before he collapses onto the ground, blood pouring from a deep cut on his forehead. “Holy shit.”

I drop the toilet lid on the floor, wasting no time as the others might notice. I go to the window again, propping myself up on the ledge and pushing my legs through first. I manage to squeeze right through the window as I hear them running up my stairs. My heart pounds as I softly shut the window and lie down on the tiles of the back porch, listening to them for a second.

“Whoa, the little human princess knocked him out. How the fuck did she do that?” Arden questions.

Emrys laughs. “Make sure Grayson doesn’t do anything stupid, while I heal him. She’s impressive, that one. Make sure she doesn’t hurt herself trying to escape.”

“It was the toilet seat,” Arden laughs, and I hear him picking it up. “Or was it the rubber duck in the hallway? Either way, it’s hilarious.”

“I’ll get her,” Grayson’s dark voice states.

The others go silent. Emrys clears his throat. “Don’t hurt her.”

His voice is like death. “The brat hurt us.”

“Gray!” Emrys shouts, but Grayson doesn’t reply. Dammit, he is coming for me, and I’ve wasted too much time. I slide down the roof panels, some of them clicking under my weight. Rain begins to pour out of the sky, making the roof slippery. A cry escapes my throat as I slip, sliding off the roof and slamming hard onto the grass. Ignoring the pain in my ribs, I climb to my feet and start sprinting straight up the garden. All at once, thick green vines shoot out of the surrounding ground, coming out of everywhere, and one trips me. I fall over, only

to be caught in the vines. I fight them as they are wrapping around my legs, arms, and chest. I manage to snap a few of them, but more just keep appearing until they're wrapped so tightly around me, squeezing me until I almost can't breathe.

Grayson's face comes into the moonlight. He is gorgeous with thick brown hair, dark golden skin, but there is a harshness to his silver eyes that matches the cruel smirk he gives me. He looks at me like I'm pathetic. "You're going to die first in the Dragon Crown Race. You're clearly stupid."

"Let me go, you fucking monster!" I scream, struggling and wriggling the best I can. He smells like the earth itself and a mixture of sandalwood that reminds me of forest walks. "Let me go! Let me go! HELP! I'm being kidnapped by crazy magic men who think they are dragons! HELP!"

"Shush, brat. You're just embarrassing yourself and giving me a headache," he mutters, picking me up with the vines like I weigh nothing. He throws me over his shoulder. "It's time to go."

My eyes widen as he twists around to look at the others, who are walking up the garden path to us. There's something in the middle of our garden. It looks like a shimmery wall, almost like it's water, but it's gold, illuminating and bright on the other side. Creatures fly through the air around the mountains and castle in the distance. They are too big to be birds. They are dragons. Actual dragons. Through it, I can see tall mountains and a silver castle nestled right in the middle of them. Orange fields surround the mountains, luminated by the night sky full of glowing yellow stars. I scream, panicking as Grayson turns and begins to walk towards it.

"Will you knock her out, Emrys? She is pissing me off," Grayson growls. *I'm pissing him off?* They are literally kidnapping me and making it sound like a chore. I hate them so much. What is my grandmother going to think when she comes home, finding a pile of ash and that I'm missing? She is going to be so worried. She has lost everyone else.

Emrys walks up to me, his eyes surprisingly soft as I keep screaming, hoping someone will come and help me. No one is

going to save me from them. Oh my god. “I’m vaguely impressed with you, Elle. I hope you win.”

He touches my cheek, and suddenly I can’t breathe. I gasp for air right before everything falls away into darkness, where I can hear wings.