



INTO THE SKIES

a Dystopian Fantasy Romance

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THIS BOOK IS FOR...

all the late-blooming dreamers,
wondering if you will ever find
your inner super power.

You will.

And for Christopher.
first, foremost, always.

MAP



PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Do not erupt like a tea kettle. Do not.

As relieved as I would feel after bellowing out my frustration to fill this tiny room, it's not enough to justify how much my outbursts upset my brothers. An occurrence that happens too often as of late.

Instead, I squint my eyes shut. I grind my teeth. I tug on my boots with fervor, even though my hands shake a bit as I do it.

I cannot have this conversation again. The fact that my boots are dangerously worn, to the point of disintegration, is salt in the wound that is this horrid afternoon. A few more weeks and they'll dissolve to dust under me during my shift. Which would be disgusting, considering the state of those floors, and an expense that would start Father off, yet again. Which would have me boiling to rival the kettle, *yet again*. I grab my jacket and huff back into the main room of the cottage.

I keep my eyes darting around the room so they don't accidentally meet Father's. Our home, a bit of a mess as always, has started to close in on me. It's such a small space for five humans. Other than our beds and a room just big enough for a faucet and wash basin, we have this one rectangle of stone, wood and thatching. Everything is dusty, gray, and old, a decaying reminder of our frail, monotonous mortality here, down below. My mind can't help but feel the space is not too different from a prison cell, lined wall to

wall with thousands of others just like, row upon row, leading towards the heart of town.

I inhale the familiar musty scent. Despite the obvious poverty of our circumstances, these four walls also hold many fond memories and can be quite cheery on sunny days. My parents are not influential or invaluable to our town, but they are in good standing.

We are blessed enough to have a good-sized window. We also have plenty of room on the counter by the sink for storing whatever spices and dried goods we can afford each month. Human couples with lesser jobs fit entire families into one room. Some young men even live in bunk houses with no space to call their own. The sagging dining table by the fire, always littered with trinkets and jackets, seems determined to fill my brothers with splinters. But we at least have room for a table. I cross over to it and close and stack the boys' books, still avoiding my father's frustrated gaze.

"Two chapters each tonight, before any sword fighting, yes?" I ask Nohem, who groans back at me, his wooden sword already in his hand. I shoot a stern glance at Brodi. "And you? Our big man, promise to grow your big mind? And little man's mind?"

He nods, puffing up with responsibility.

The sight of it breaks me a tiny bit. Ten years old and already he is feeling the pressure. Of our measly human plight, of my many failures, of our father's hopes. The boys look just like him, as do I. Dusty brown hair, big green eyes, and a smattering of freckles.

I can't blame Father. He is just like *his* father, and every human father before him. Pushing, dreaming, pleading to Creator above for their children to be Placed. If they can't get Placed in the sky, the hope is to at least achieve a decent station in town.

And here I am, his firstborn, the mighty barmaid.

What wonders.

I almost take an exaggerated low bow in front of Father just to see his reaction, but that might invite further conversation. I keep moving.

"I'm closing tonight, so I'll see you all in the morning!" I dart out the front door before my father can reply. I pull on my jacket, trying to slough the guilt and shame off my scrawny shoulders.

I already know all the words he was going to say. *I have to find someone to train me in a marketable skill. I have to secure a decent, respectable job to avoid Assignment. I should barter or beg for any kind of assistant position—really, any other position in this whole starsforsaken town would do. Ask friends, ask strangers, grovel,* he would say. All so I can *go to court, find my soulmate, make a life.* He would rail on and on.

But I already have a life.

Irritation builds, step by memorized step, from our cottage to Whistler Tavern, where I work. I can't even take in that it is a lovely spring evening as I pass from our cottage district into the next. I step on all the large cracks as I go, a silly superstition I can't shake. As if there would be any holy stone exposed in a crevice waiting to give me

burst of good luck along this forgotten human byway. Still, it's a habit, stuck on like tree sap.

The cracks start to disappear, and the low sun paints strokes of pink and orange on the taller homes. Some of them even have buds starting in flower boxes out front. I hope they planted color. Something to break up all the gray upon brown upon gray upon brown. I stop short on a corner, almost clobbered by a horse and carriage, lost in my thoughts.

It passes, not without some muttered curses from its driver, and I press on.

The shadows turn to sparkling lilac as I make my way into Raetown proper. The cobblestones beneath me smooth out. Buildings get taller and crowds grow bigger. And I grow angrier. Without thinking, I've found the rhythm of a horse nearby and begun walking in step with him.

Rhythm always finds me this way. Or I find it, particularly when I'm feeling emotional. Which is often. In time with the street's drumming, I leap over a puddle. At the start of the business sectors, I spin around a streetlamp to avoid a messenger running past. The sounds of the town become music for my restless feet.

Am I the only restless one? Men and women trudge in and out of shops, to work or from work, back to their tiny cottages. Some cart goods from the market, some cart children. All are exhausted, hungry, listless and, in my opinion, sad.

That's what I would be without my little low-paying job. That's what Father just doesn't understand. It doesn't

matter to me if it doesn't pay well. It doesn't matter if I'll have to take on an Assignment.

I have learned to shrug off the groping, sneering drunks. I have figured out how to chat up customers for better coin, helping them to forget their miserable fates for a while. I always have a quick joke about the elves or a funny hobbit tale to tell. But most of all, I get to be truly myself for a few precious minutes every few hours. I get to laugh with friends and feel something light and happy for a breath. Feel something other than concern, dread, shame, weariness.

My waltzing steps speed to an almost run as I reach the lower business district.

Father doesn't comprehend that I get to experience actual joy. What other humans can say that? What joy do they find in their day to day lives serving the almighty High Fae above?

Surely my father doesn't experience a crumb of happiness in the Star King's human armada. How could he, when he sends young men to fight our overlords' battles for them? We wouldn't want the fae to actually get their precious wings dirty. No, if it involves manual labor, blood, sweat, tears...that's a task for a human. *Stomp, step, step, stomp, stomp, stomp.*

And Mother, working to the bone at the factory, does she find happiness there? Sure, they are soulmates, lucky to have found each other, so the saying goes. *Blessed with Creator's ultimate gift, finding their soul's one true love.* To be mated is to have found your true match, one soul separated into two halves. It's a lifelong, unbreakable bond,

more powerful than any other. So I have read in books and sung in songs and heard over and over again my whole life long.

But are my parents' souls *happy*?

Perhaps they are.

Mother has a keen mind for science and tested well, and thus received a coveted Placement in one of the starlight labs. Not in the clouds, but a great position below. She got to fall in love with Father and build a life. Does she like the life she's built? I can't ask because I rarely see her. For a supposedly advantageous vocation, they keep her on a suffocating schedule now.

I wonder if it's that much better than an Assignment. My parents certainly think so. So what if I have to join a clean-up crew or join the ranks of the Unplaced, like me, who maintain waste pipes and clean up trash? Assignments cover the jobs no human would volunteer for. I know it will be unpleasant, but even with my Assignment, I can keep some hours at the Whistler. That's the beauty of being unplaced—no one cares about my comings and goings.

Ah, but what, my parents cry, about going to court, finding a soulmate?

Well, what I see between my parents doesn't match what I read about in books. The fleeting feelings I've felt for boys never matched what we sing about in tavern songs. For all the talk of love and the bond of souls, I've never seen it or felt it.

My pace slows a bit.

And is Isa happy, wherever on this big star planet she is? Did she find her soulmate in the sky? I wonder, every day.

It's been almost four years, but I remember Placement Day vividly. I'll never forget it. All of our teachers paraded the Last Years to the front of the schoolroom, to the cheers of our younger classmates. Parents joined us that day as well, some excited, some concerned, all of them tense.

Our headmaster announced with glee that Isa, my dearest friend in all the world, had achieved the ultimate dream. The High Council, by way of our governor, decided she was to be Placed not only in a sky city, but in Connestell's capitol city of Raelus, right above us.

It was no surprise that she would be Placed. That afternoon she said farewell to me, to her parents and sisters, and a sentry took her away. No one down here who hasn't been Placed above can know for sure, but we assume the sentries take Placed humans downtown. From there it's rumored elves take the humans from the governor's office up to the sky. One has to fly or have magic to get up into the sky cities, so the elf theory makes sense.

The Placed are rarely seen again.

I plod in time with a water wheel spinning across the street. No, I was not Placed. Placement is the goal, and I failed. Even after being passed over for Placement, I am still failing as a barmaid. I haven't forced myself to take a better job to avoid Assignment. I am happy in my low station and will be happy still, even if I have to shovel filth a few hours a week. Because I will also get to spend a few hours at the tavern.

I am content.

But my parents aren't—and won't be. I have felt Father's worried stares ever since. I dodge Mother's concern as best I can.

I simply did not measure up to the mighty fae's standards. But very few humans do. Only a handful are chosen from each town every year. Father and Mother could not have been too terribly shocked.

And I do not want to be in the sky anyway, I have convinced myself. I am happy enough below, where most just find their soulmates, work their jobs, keep themselves busy, and try to live the best mortal life they can. I take a deep breath, knowing my walk is ending soon. Time to get to work.

And I am lucky. I remind myself again, stepping in time with a hammer crashing nails into the new building going up across the street. Father cares about me, so he pushes me. I still have both my parents. My life could be so much worse, truly.

I am lucky enough to be born in a human city that sees sunlight, at least. It is whispered that in some kingdoms, the sky cities above block out any sunlight below. Humans in such places work day and night only by starlight lanterns. The only place they can go other than work is the temple, and they cram into barracks rather than their own homes. They do not get to find their soulmates, marry, or raise children.

I live in a city with not only sunshine but also human-owned shops, parks, taverns and even one small library. These are luxuries, I know. I am lucky enough to have been born to middle-class human parents with their own cottage

—and two bedrooms, at that. And I am lucky enough to have a job I love.

I pause and smile in the side street before pulling on the plain wooden door, behind which lies my whole world.

CHAPTER 2

“Almost late again, Jaylyn!” Markius grunts as I walk into The Whistler Tavern.

“Aha, almost, good sir! *Almost!*” I smile in a way I know secretly makes his crusty old heart melt. His bushy eyebrows come down from where his hairline once was, and he lets out half a chuckle that shakes his whole round body.

On the hook by the back service door, I exchange my tattered jacket for a worn, stained apron. The smock is filthy, and my dress underneath it is not much better. But I don’t mind.

I feel my anger morphing into expectant joy as I pass through the busy kitchen. I breathe in the clouds of delicious steam and quickly steal a roll. Barta curses at me from the stove but I am already on my way out. “You love me, Barta. Best rolls in all of Raetown!”

In the glowing hall, I survey my section. A few patrons shuffle in the front door. They’re aiming to beat the dinner rush that’s soon to start.

I am not the best maid, so I don’t serve the best seats in the house. The innermost section of the large C-shape of the tavern has finer wood tables. The lanterns hanging from the high wooden ceilings are dusty and dim, and the good section has smaller lights on each table.

Those seats are also closest to the small wooden stage.

My favorite place on the whole planet.

What I lack in serving skills I make up for with charm. I twirl from table to table as I pour, place, wink, laugh. I avoid Solom's greedy advances once again. "Take an old man for a spin, Jay!" he says, to which I reply, "You can take me right here and now if you can stand up, Sol."

He can't.

A farmer slurs as I appear with a tray, "I wonder, is your juggling so sure in the bedroom?"

"I'm sure you'll never find out!"

My section really roars when a female gardener says, "You really run your tongue," and I snap back, "Not as well as your husband did last night!" She laughs too. It grows tiresome some nights, but when I look into a weary human's eyes, I know this is likely the first time they have laughed in a month.

Finally, it is time for what makes the Whistler Tavern the most popular pub in Raetown, maybe even in all of Connestell. Sari, the other barmaids, and I make our way to the stage as three musicians and everyone's favorite bard, Welton the Whistler, start a song.

And then, thank Creator, I get to dance.

We bring Welton's song to life with precise, graceful choreography that works my stiff muscles and keeps the tiny light in my soul from dying out. We spin and stomp and sing along in parts. I let out all the emotion raging inside through my feet. I feel warmth swell, and I try my best to share it with the customers.

I swear that for these few minutes, feeling collectively together, we humans generate our own magic.

Loads lighten and eyes sparkle again as people clap or sing along or simply watch. This, this feeling, this moment—it's the closest I've ever felt to love, to joy, to the ecstasy *the soul's bond* is meant to be.

And I'm to give it up? For a few more coins per day?

Madness.

As we finish our dance, the crowd cheers and Welton cries out the same phrase as he does with every performance. "Many thanks to our gracious Star King above!"

The whole crowd looks up, steins raised. "To King Arian!" Some grumble, some cheer, some recite the familiar call with no feeling at all.

But when I say it, most nights, I almost mean it.

Somewhere in the floating fae city above us is Arian, the King of Starlight. He and his kind can twist light, commandeer lightning, and who knows what else. He is a tyrant lording over us, yes. But whether through permission or ignorance or disinterest, he allows us to have taverns. He allows his human subjects some niceties. Some kings do not. In all seven kingdoms, humans are to work the land, raise the food, serve in the army, and become cogs in the industrial wheels that turn ever upward, to the fae.

Oh, and to marry and breed more cogs. Of course.

Whether in the clouds or on the ground, humans are to be of use. Full stop. So how can Isa's life up in the air be much better than mine on the ground?

In the middle of my shift, I go out into the alley to dump a pail and throw a glare up the street towards the heart of town, where Isa must have gone on Placement Day those years ago. Her father radiated like a lamppost as she left the school, proud that not only was his daughter worthy of ascending into the skies, to see the fae in person and experience their magic and power, but from then on, he'd receive a small Placement bonus in his salary. *Here are a few coins in exchange for your child's life. Be grateful!*

It all disgusts me, but perhaps some small part of me, buried deep down, is simply jealous. I realized it around thirteen—that Isa would be chosen, deemed worthy of Placement, and I wouldn't. She was leaps and bounds smarter than anyone else in class. She was drop-dead gorgeous too, even when we were younger. She is probably up in the clouds at this moment, falling in love with an equally handsome man as they serve magical wine together to some faerie queen. They laugh and whisper to each other. *Can you believe we used to live on the ground? In the actual dirt? What a wonder!*

All right, so I am jealous.

Of her new friends and her new life.

She was my near-constant companion for six years. We talked about boys and dreamed of our eventual mates. We wondered about fun careers and seeing a hobbit up close and all kinds of silly things. In unspoken truth, though, we both knew she would be Placed and I wouldn't. Eventually she was, and I never saw her again.

I make sure to pour the slop from the pail in the exact direction of the Raetown governor's mansion. Starlight

lamps illuminate the crest etched on the gleaming stone building. The structure has bits of holy stone in it, visible though small. It's the only place you'll find holy stone below, other than in the temples.

As if the governor deserves a glowing home.

One bright blue block at the top boasts an engraved twelve-pointed star, said to represent Loya. But we know it is the mark of the High Council. The shining blue-gray building stands taller than all those around it, which also tower above normal cottages and businesses. Those towers apparently hold *the best* of us, living alongside our human governor.

Governor is a stupid title. He doesn't govern us so much as he oversees the delivery of everything we produce to our sky city without issue.

I squint upward. I can barely see Raelus with the low clouds of the evening. It reminds me of Nohem's spinning top, hovering above, sparkling with light. School lessons teach that Loya's seven kingdoms are dotted with the floating structures, designed especially for our winged masters.

Isa is up there, right now. A beautiful exception to the rule.

The rule of our realm's landscape is that its many mountain ranges are elven territory, and the foothills of the mountains are said to be hobbit lands. Humans aren't allowed to venture far outside of the low, flat desolate areas, underneath the sky cities. Each species in their own area since the Great War, when an evil fae king attempted to create some kind of master magical race and then

started wiping out the lesser three races altogether. Arian's ancestors led the resistance on behalf of elves, hobbits, and humans. Save a few Placed humans who can be useful above, and elven sentries who sometimes come below so that the fae don't have to, we all remain separated for our own protection—to *keep the planet in perfect balance and peace.*

But the hovering cities, though they may vary in size, are made of solid stone.

To me, they feel like a distinct threat.

They live stacked, castle upon castle, towering up to a point high in the atmosphere. The middle of the city spreads wide, and the bottom comes to a point again, low, but still well above ground. We aren't taught how the massive constructs maintain their place, floating in the sky above. But the failure of their edifices—which we are responsible for supplying—would smash us all.

I close my eyes and imagine I have magic, that I can send Isa a message with my mind. *Please don't let your new home obliterate your old one.*

Mother says I have a flair for the dramatic.

Raelus is the tallest and grandest of the sky cities, our teachers claim, not that we'll ever know if that is indeed the case. Perhaps Raetown is a slum and the rest of the world pities us. But I doubt that, based on the stories and grumblings from the traders and sentries I serve at the Tavern. Trips to and from the border trading posts confirm that other kingdoms shamelessly work humans to the bone. Arian gives us a tiny bit of reprieve.

So honestly, for an average, insignificant almost-slave, my life is not so bad.

By the time my shift ends in the wee hours, my exasperation has all but vanished. Welton, my dearest friend since Isa's departure, walks me home. There was a time I hoped Welton would be my soulmate. Until I saw how he looked at his drummer, Darius. I've never looked at another person that way, and no one has ever gazed at me with such adoration either. I've never even caught Father staring at Mother that way.

Welt and I chat our way through the growing darkness. Near the pub and in the wealthiest parts of town, there are plenty of starlight lampposts and stationed armada sentries. But the farther we go from the heart of town, the number of lights and patrolmen drops dramatically.

"Have even more lanterns gone dark tonight?" I ask Welton as we near the first cottage district.

"Yes, thank Arian for the moon tonight or we'd trip. Can't have our prime dancer mangling an ankle." He shifts his lute satchel on his shoulder. "I heard in Amanza, King Dio simply doesn't give humans starlight at night anymore. Can you imagine?"

"Same in Lamento, although there they have more old-fashioned fire lanterns and candles, of course."

He gasps dramatically, "Imagine my fair complexion in low lighting. Sounds positively dreadful."

I laugh. We try to keep things light, neither of us admitting how wary we are. With the growing starlight outages have come rumors of graglins tearing through

towns, leaving human body parts in their wake. There have even been whispers of graglins coming up from underground in groups. If true, graglins are not as we were taught—dumb, solitary overgrown pests.

Welton continues to distract us both. “Well done evading that handsy blacksmith. I thought I was going to have to step in until you called him a...what was it again?”

“A fat soot-soaked meat sack.”

“Aha, yes, that might be my new favorite.” We reach my doorstep, and he gives a deep bow. “See you tomorrow, Jaylyn Hoste, Premiere Dancer and Master of Insults.”

“See you, Whistler of Whistlers.”

I feel my way through the darkness from the front door to my bedroom. I walk in carefully, knowing the boys have left all manner of clothes and toys on the floor. My knee feels the corner of their bed, which means just one step over is my own. I have barely taken off my skirts before I drift into contented sleep, blissfully ignorant of the absolute terror I'll face in the morning light.

CHAPTER 3

Routine tells my body it is time to wake in the early afternoon, and I smile, smelling breakfast. My mouth waters happily at the thought of hot eggs instead of porridge—

Wait.

No, this is all wrong. No one should be home to cook. My heart starts to hammer with dread as I step out of bed and pull my dress back on. I imagine all the different scenarios that would result in someone other than me being home now, in the middle of the day.

Every day is always the same.

I wake in the early afternoon to an empty house and feed myself cold slop because it's easy. I stretch and work on various dance combinations to wake myself. And to keep myself in shape, lest I needed to run from drunken patrolmen.

It's always a blasted sentry, waiting behind the tavern. They police their own kind with vigor and don't dare let us forget their tiny nugget of authority. Many of them come into the tavern after ending their patrol and—I assume to assuage deep guilt at how they treat their fellow humans—drink themselves into oblivion. Usually, I cut them down with words or physically dodge their sloppy advances, but it helps to be fit enough to run away if necessary.

When I started at the Tavern I was unsure and a bit gangly. As I've grown in confidence, and womanly curves, the attempts at me have increased. Usually, I cut them

down with words or physically dodge their sloppy advances, but it helps to be fit enough to run away if necessary.

That's how I learned to dance, after all.

It didn't dawn on me until I was older that my favorite thing to do in all the world is not considered an activity of enjoyment and leisure in the human world. Dancing is not something of artistic or aesthetic value, but rather a way to keep female humans fit. The High Council keeps humans moving until we enter the labor force. Boys train for battles, and women dance.

The High Council. The thought of the High Council never fails to fill me with equal parts dread and disgust.

I try to quicken my fingers as I fasten the buttons on my dress, but my hands quiver.

My meager education has only taught me the basics of Loya's political structure, but there are seven fae kingdoms, each with a different set of powers and proclivities. They each rule over one realm: ground, air, fire, water, flesh, starlight or the soul. They represent their realm on the High Council, which acts as both enactor of law and arbiter of justice. Their word is higher than that of my Governor or King. They decide the fate of this entire star.

The council holds twelve seats: the seven kings, the high priestess, and the elders of each of the four races. This is laughable because Loya's oldest faerie, oldest elf and oldest hobbit, all probably exceed a thousand years or age, and our oldest contributing human male is probably in his sixties. The weakest seat on the council for the human, and the most powerful for the King of Souls, Zaynr Rune.

I shudder as I straighten, thinking of him. King Zaynr, also known as the Dark King, the King of Terror, and many more frightful names, is the most powerful of all the fae kings—and the most vile. It's been told through the ages that he can read minds, manipulate your vision, and can amplify negative emotions to the extreme, pushing his enemies until they go insane from their own fear or rage. I shudder again.

After eating and stretching every day, I prepare some extra lessons for my brothers before they arrive home from school. Brodi clearly has a mind for math, and Nohem, still so young, also shows promise.

I may be a failure, but they will not be. That's what I assure myself as I lead them in activities, books, and puzzles during the two hours between their arrival from school and my departure to the tavern. If I can get them to genius level, like Isa, they'll be Placed somewhere other than the armada. The soldiery is where almost all human boys end up, unless they are physically unfit, or mentally exceptional. I don't necessarily want them above, but I cannot stomach the idea of them dying on a battlefield down here in a Governors' dispute or a clash between two winged kings in the sky.

After working with my brothers, I rush to my shift. I eat something Barta has prepared for the staff, come alive for a few fleeting moments on stage, dodge perverts, eat leftovers in the wee hours, and walk home with Welton.

The end. Every sunup to sundown for most of the last four years.

Father is at the base during the day or away on missions, which have been happening more and more of late, each leaving him bruised or bleeding. I don't know what he actually does in the armada, but he is a colonel now, so I assume he is skilled. When not away on his mysterious quests, he arrives home just before I leave for the tavern. Mother leaves before I wake and returns after I've already headed into town for the night. So...who under the wings above is making breakfast at the fireplace?

"Mother?" I croak out.

I try to remember the last time I saw her. Has it been weeks, maybe a month? She looks tired. Older than her years and frail from being indoors on her feet all day, I assume, doing something very scientific to help maximize the starlight in the lights, pumps, and other goods the factory produces.

Hers is a high station below since starlight is the core of Loya, the star planet on which I stand. Its light has been harnessed into power that runs all civilization on the planet. It keeps lights on and water running and, I assume, holds the giant faerie cities afloat in the clouds. All thanks to Arian who, our history books say, is the best and wealthiest ruler, and *aren't we all just so lucky to have been born in his kingdom of Connestell.*

During and after the Great War, humans were treated as dogs, worthless unpaid slaves. But King Arian, in his kindness, changed our fate and influenced the rest of the High Council to allow us to find our soulmates and work and live somewhat freely—freely as long as we continued

doing whatever menial labor, experiments, and war fighting the fae wouldn't do themselves.

Lazy bastards.

In short, my mother is smart. Not Placement smart, but almost. With the rolling starlight outages across town lately, I know she is under immense pressure. Even with her fatigue, she is still strikingly beautiful. The sun catches her dark brown hair as she turns from the fireplace towards the table. With the steam from the pan in front, a glow shines around her silhouette in the tiny room. I love her so and wish desperately in this moment that she could rest, could enjoy her life.

"Jaylyn! I made you some breakfast!" She greets me warmly, as if this whole scene isn't the oddest thing to happen in months. Her tight, false smile reveals the truth.

Father has called in his reinforcements.

I groan. "Buttering me up before another lecture?"

"I can't cook for my firstborn?"

I take a step towards her. "Why aren't you at work? Are you in trouble?"

"Stars, no. Ever so dramatic. I took some sick leave."

"Are you sick?!"

Terror bubbles up underneath my skin. Illness is serious for humans. Raetown at least has access to fae healers, but it can take weeks to get an appointment. One has to be healthy to be productive. If a human is no longer contributing, because of illness or simply old age, they are sent to the Fallows. I wince, thinking back only a few

months to when we sent Grandfather, my last living grandparent, off with a quick goodbye ceremony, into the hands of a Sentry. The thought of Mother joining him there...

“Sick leave, Mother, honestly?”

“We need to talk, Jay-jay.”

“Oh, boy. Resorting to pet names.” I harrumph as I sit down at the table where she’s set the dish of piping-hot placation. My pride protests, but my stomach wins out. Self-respect holds little sway against the promise of hot bacon.

“Your father said you aren’t listening to his pleas...*our* pleas. You have had a few years, but really, dear, it’s time to get serious.”

“I’m plenty serious about my life.”

“Jaylyn, what life? You aren’t even trying to save to go to court. Without proper courting, how will you find your soulmate? Who will court you after you’ve been...Assigned? Do you want to remain alone forever?” Her voice starts to crack, but she calms herself. “I know you enjoy your job, now but it’s time. It’s time to start a true profession so you can earn enough for a dowry.”

“It *is* a profession, Mother. I work and I get a wage and I help provide for us, don’t I? I buy extra books for the boys? New boots?”

“It’s a tiny wage from a place that will be done with you in a couple years when you spend your days at your Assignment and are no longer so...pleasing to the eye.” She

glares with her eyes as I roll my own. I am not the ugliest berry in the batch, but I am no stunner. No Isa.

“But I can dance there and—”

“For how long? Your body will start to fail you as well. And without a profession to continue, something to keep you from Assignment, without a decent wage coming in, you know you won’t be courted. You won’t be able to find your mate, to marry, to build a home of your own.” The food starts to lose its taste as a headache begins. We’ve already had this discussion a hundred times.

“I don’t mind hard labor. Assignment or not, I don’t want to court or marry or *breed* Mother, which is what you’re really getting at!”

“Well, that’s just it, Jaylyn.” Her face turns grave. “You... don’t have a choice.”

“What? What does that mean?” I set my fork down.

“You have to. To breed.” She lowers her voice. “At twenty-two...if not married, that will be your Assignment.”

“I...” I flop back in my seat. “I don’t understand.”

“Women are not assigned to the pipes or the fields, Jaylyn. You will go to one of the med houses and be...impregnated.” My stomach plummets into my boots. “Your father couldn’t bring himself to say it.”

“Impregnated? So you mean—”

“No, it’s not done that way, with a man.” She stutters her explanation as she watches the color drain from my face. “Seed is collected, then inserted, with the help of human

nurses and fae healers. But Jaylyn...then, that...that is your Assignment. Full-time. That becomes your profession.”

“My profession?”

“You bear and nurse children until you can no longer do so.”

Turmoil takes over my mind, confusion and heartbreak and disgust. This cannot be real. But then, of course it can be. Humans on the ground produce everything the fae need above, we grow their food, raise their cattle, our factories are full of their eventual belongings.

They need humans. A lot of humans.

My mouth is so dry I can hardly get out the words. “How have I...why didn’t you...you didn’t tell me?”

“I hoped I wouldn’t have to. You’re so beautiful, Jaylyn, and charming. These past few years you’ve really blossomed. Markius struck gold having you at the Whistler, truly. So...well, I thought I wouldn’t have to terrify you with the truth. I hoped and prayed surely some man would have caught your eye by now, inspired you to change your station so you could be properly courted.”

Heavy bacon was a bad choice. I dart over to the waste bin by the door and upend my breakfast.

Hunching over the barrel, I think about her words.

I have seen it happen a million times over. Waitresses come into the tavern, only to leave months later. They sigh about fate, Creator sending them their soulmate at last. Some bumbling bloke they just met or have known for only

days or weeks. They drone on and on about the tug at their chest, the tie around their very being.

They grow quite boring, only ever talking about their mate from then on. Though they don't bore me for long. They quickly find a better position so they can be eligible to pay their dowry and marry.

Even Sari is leaving the Whistler soon. She found a job assisting one of the tailors who makes all the fae fabric and clothing for Raelus. She'll make enough to complete the dowry requirements, so together she and...whatever his name is can afford a marriage contract and a cottage of their own.

If I see the women again, it's usually with babes in tow, looking as tired and empty as they did before courtship. Maybe even more. Women can reduce their hours for a time immediately after childbirth but must continue to work through their childbearing years. The spark in their eyes is usually gone, the clutching of their chest a memory.

Is that true love, if it fades so quickly and completely?

I realize the harsher truth, and it hits me in a rush.

Bar maids and harpists and other acquaintances over the years...they've simply vanished. I remember mumbled answers to my questions, that friends had moved or fallen sick or some other vague explanation. All at around twenty-two years old.

I turn to my mother. "And after? When a woman whose job is to bear children is...when she passes childbearing age, what then?"

“If there are low-level jobs available, she may take one of those. Some stay on as wetnurses in those same breeding centers. But many don’t...”

“So then?”

“Then they are no longer productive.”

I hurl out my insides into the bin again at her words. She crosses over to rub my back but says nothing. She gives me a few more moments to think. But it is hard to think with this crushing disappointment and fear and loathing rolling through me.

“Does everyone know this? Have you always known?”

She sighs painfully. “I tried to warn you that Assignment is worse than you thought, but it’s improper to talk openly about what it means for a woman. And, as I said, why scare you?”

“And all the talk of soulmates, that only counts until one is twenty-two?”

“One can only find their mate if they are out looking, Jaylyn...going to court meetings.”

I have always believed I would rather die than give up my life to go to what sounded like a series of terrible formal dinners. Dinners where souls meet their matches, somehow. If you didn’t find your true love the first time, you could go back until you did.

It’s not that I haven’t wanted a soulmate.

I believe—believed—I had more time. Why not dance, sing, and laugh until I couldn’t anymore, muddle through

both my dancing and my Assignment until I grew weary, and then worry about changing my station?

I suppose now I have my answer.

For humans, soulmates are found at court, in the governor's mansion, where the proper conversation and connection can be established. The connection between mates is a deep, primal, inescapable, divine thing for every species on Loya.

Foolishly, I haven't taken the time to understand how it all works. There is dinner, dancing and some kind of ceremony. But night after night in the tavern, I've seen the eligible men of Raetown and...*Creator spare me*. I've always just dodged their advances with a joke and a smile.

But the soulmate connection, the love between mates, it has always seemed undeniable. Sari is beside herself with joy and anticipation. I haven't let myself really consider what court is like, since I can't afford to go. The experience didn't feel it was worth leaving my beloved tavern, but now...now Father's insistence makes sense.

But many things don't make sense.

"Why twenty-two? Why send us to school, let us live normal lives at all?"

She looks past me in thought. "No one knows. One theory is that the fae want to produce the healthiest humans possible. What Arian allows is what he believes will give him the most, best human offspring."

I don't even know what to say to that.

I raise from my bent position. "How did you find out?"

Mother is hurting with me, I can see. We are both holding back tears, but she presses on. “I had my station at the laboratory, but your Aunt Jane was content to volunteer at the library—like you, Jay. She had the dowry but was in no hurry. When I was twenty and she was twenty-one, your grandfather said she had to start going to court. It wasn’t a choice. Later your grandmother explained why. Jane begged me to go with her. Luckily one night at court I met your father, she met your uncle, and that was that. It was Creator’s fate for us.”

That was that? Is the room spinning?

She and Father have always seemed warm, friendly. They respect each other and love me and the boys well. But they have never seemed like doe-eyed soulmates. I suppose they have been together for decades. Love must simply wear off. Fade. Or maybe they were never like Sari and the others, bubbling with affection.

Maybe having a soulmate doesn’t always mean storybook romance. Maybe love is another luxury. Love is not vital to productivity. After all, one can produce offspring without love. Without even a man present, apparently. My mind and heart spin with the cottage around me.

“Think, Jaylyn.” She squeezes my shoulders. “You must start saving every coin, and we must think. Have you inquired again about teaching dance at one of the schools?”

“I’ve told you a million times,” I say, my voice barely a whisper. My ears ring and tears spill over with so much rage and fear I might faint. “Those positions never open unless a Madame dies or retires to a different teaching job.

Remember, that happened with Madame Soo just before I matriculated. Now none of them are even near old age.”

“It’s time to ask around again. Ask your friend at the tavern. Sage?”

“Sari.”

“Ask Sari if she knows of any openings, assistant positions, anything valuable, to avoid Assignment. Please, Jaylyn. You must.”

We sit in silence for what feels like forever. I wait for the room to stop turning.

“Okay, Mother. Okay.”

She exhales the most relieved, heavy sigh I’ve ever heard. Because she is right. I may not be desperate for love or for a mate, but I cannot become a breeder. I will not vanish like mist, taken to a med center in the dead of night. I will give up my life as I know it since it was about to be taken from me. I must to find a way to get to court. I must, and I will.

But first, I’ll dance my last great song, my last happy night. One last night as my truest self.

CHAPTER 4

The afternoon is a blur. I go through the motions with the boys, but my mind storms. My emotions rise and fall and turn in cloudy circles.

Everyone around my age finds a position to earn the funds to take their beau to court, or to frequent court to find one. They court, marry, or simply disappear. I don't know any unmarried women in their twenties other than Sari. How did I not notice this before?

Barta's assistant is the only one. She is in her forties. But she appeared in the kitchen one day and never said where she was from or where she had worked before. Barta gave me such an odd look about it that I never asked further.

I try not to snap at my brothers in my fury through the afternoon. I'm beyond angry. At my mother, at the fae, at the whole world, and then at myself for not putting all the horrific pieces together. I mumbled as much to my mother before she left. She replied that I was so focused on the boys and my job that I didn't notice much else.

I suppose that's true. I have my dancing and friends who work alongside me at the tavern. There are no real social gatherings for humans beyond tavern, court, or temple. I don't frequent shops or our one museum. I am always either at the tavern or helping my brothers. My soul has been plenty happy without a soulmate, so I haven't been looking for one.

I haven't experienced love. I am not sure I've even felt real lust. There have been occasional passionate moments in

the tavern bathroom or back alley. But they were few, fun, and short. The quick unions with handsome men whose names I don't remember never left me daydreaming of marriage. The experiences never left me longing for a mate. And it never explained to me why there was all the fussing over love and soulmates.

I had resigned myself to living with my parents for the rest of my life, not earning enough for a courtship dowry. Maybe one day I would take a secret lover, I'd thought. But Barta, Markius, Welton, Sari—I have them. I have music and dance, and that is enough for me.

Was enough.

I had them.

It is all over now. It was about to be, anyway, I just didn't know it.

At least now, I know. I am in control of my fate.

Since Mother left, I have grown in my resolve. I will not—cannot—under any starsforsaken circumstances become a slave whose sole job is to produce more slaves. Even with a mate, I will simply track the calendar and not fall pregnant. *So there, flying monkey tyrants.*

I decide I'll ask Sari for help tonight, as soon as I can get her alone. I am changing my path. Even if I am angry and sad and none of this is right or fair, it is the only choice.

If there is a soulmate on Loya for me, I will find him.



Our first song rings out in the tavern, and we move in perfect, happy synchronization, but I can't smile. Welton knows something is amiss but instead of spilling my guts, I ask him to play what I call *my song*, just this once. He sees something in my eyes, hears the edge to my tone, so he obliges.

It's a heartbreaking song he taught me after-hours one night. I've made up a dance to go along, just for me, a solo performance. Markius will scold us after this, I know. His short, hunched frame will huff, and his round face will grow red as rose petals, but I don't care.

Welton begins the song, and I take the stage. The crowd quiets as they always do for the bard's funny verses and the girls' rustling skirts. But these verses aren't funny, and the stage only holds me. The melody is haunting, about the last mermaid, lonely since all her kind have died out. The other musicians pick up the tune as it goes, building the song in intensity and depth.

Tears threaten as I dance with my whole soul, knowing I'll never get to do this number again. I let my anguish fill me. I twirl and leap as Welton's smooth voice rings out. It is as if even the customers are coming out of their stupors, sensing something is different.

Time slows down. Forks still and drinks stay fixed on the tables. All eyes are on me, and I know it, I savor it. My feet are sure, my hands precise. I don't falter on any of the turns. I hear sniffs in the crowd, sure I can make out tears on faces other than mine—and on Welton's. He can feel it too, the change in the air, in me.

The crescendo of the last note rings out, and I freeze. Everything freezes with me. It is so quiet inside we can hear the clatter of horseshoes outside.

In my stilled arms, I hold the world in a moment of suspended breath.

Until a moment later, as the whole assembly of guests cheers and raises their glasses. Some dab their eyes with their napkins. I break my pose and turn to smile at the crowd—right as all the jovial air leaves the room. The cheers are snuffed out as one figure stands center in the audience.

“Brava, milady, brava!” He comes to the center, taking off his hood, walking forward as everyone stares.

An elf.

He could almost be a tall, muscular human if he didn't have those pointed ears. And his flawless skin with strikingly symmetrical features. Like the fae, elves are beautiful and alluring, but leaner, with sharper edges, and of course without wings. This one is handsome in a stark, intimidating way, with long, straight sandy-brown hair and brown eyes dark enough to hide a million secrets.

He is terrifying.

I freeze again, along with everyone else. Markius somehow springs into action.

“M-my, my lord! What an honor to have an elf in our midst! Had you shown yourself, I would have—”

“Never mind, barkeep,” the elf says with a dismissive wave of his hand. It disgusts me. The tavern hall is now

pure tension.

It's known that elves patrol towns for the fae. Recently we've heard rumors of elves in town hunting for a graglin. Last year, I heard an elf rounded up a group of disobedient human sentries and took them away in a flash. But we never see the elves with our own eyes. We never could have dreamed in a million years one would be drinking ale among us. Yet here he is.

"I've only ever seen a room so captivated in one place, madam. Can you guess where?" He flashes me a wide, wicked smile. For the first time possibly ever, I don't know what to say. I manage to grunt.

"The palace of the Star King himself," he finishes. Murmurs and whispers ripple through the room.

"You...you flatter me, sir," I mumble, still unmoving.

"Such talent isn't allowed to stay below, my dear," he replies calmly. I try to process what that means. So...I'm to die? To be sent to jail? To be shipped early to the med center?

"Ha! No! No talent, my lord. Just a daft, lowly bar maid, I assure you," Welton gawks. I will thank him and also pummel him for that comment later.

The elf ignores Welton and turns to Markius. "I am taking this barmaid for Placement."

What?

"Placement? But she's years beyond—"

The elf holds up a hand to silence my boss, my old friend.

“Placement is based on talent, not age, you fool. How fortunate that I happened to be here to bear witness. Now I will take her where I suspect she belongs—up into the clouds.”

The clouds.

The clouds!

I start shaking. Markius gasps, the room along with him. “But, sir—”

“You dare talk back to an elf?” The elf seems genuinely surprised. He throws Markius a couple coins. “For your trouble with the rest of tonight’s shift. Come, girl, let’s discover your fate.”

My feet are glued as I look to Welton, then to Markius. The elf moves to the edge of the stage and stretches out his hand. He has long fingers that look strong, swift, deadly. I try to think coherently, but terror has wrapped around my thoughts like a scarf. My mind and my throat have closed.

“Wh-where?”

“To wherever I want to take you, human.” He laughs back at me.

Welton, Creator bless him, speaks up. “Sir, what of her family? She has two young brothers...”

“Then they will be overjoyed to know their sister might be Placed.”

I have never been so dumbfounded in my life. I can sense he is growing impatient, so I move towards him. Finally, my mouth begins to function again.

Welton gives me a knowing look, already nodding as I instruct my dearest friend. “Please, my brothers, my parents, tell them I—”

Before I can finish, the treacherous elf grabs me, and in an instant, the tavern is gone.

CHAPTER 5

I see Welton sitting on his stool, off to the side of the stage. I see the wood walls and stone floor. The patrons, their mouths hanging open. I see it all in a warm lantern glow.

And then darkness.

I am being pushed and pulled, squeezed and stretched. Moving forward and backward, up and down. Spinning to the left, twisting to the right. All of that, together, for what might be two seconds, maybe three. The time it takes to close my eyes.

When I open them, my brain can't comprehend what I am experiencing.

First is the scent, rich honeysuckle but with warm spices, as if a wonderful meal is being prepared nearby, layered on a clean smell, like wet stone after rain.

My mind catches up with my eyes.

The elf has me by the elbow, and we stand side by side on a huge veranda. Where rough wooden stage floor rested below my boots, there is now lush deep-blue carpet that stretches down the entire balcony ahead. And, finding my balance, looking past my feet, I take them in.

Faeries.

Twenty, thirty. More. The closest I've ever seen them. My stomach abandons me, awe and fright taking its place.

Men and women—er, males and females—each with unique yet perfect features. They are so beautiful it is hard to look away from one to the next. Their forms look human,

if human beauty had been perfected for thousands of years. Their skin is fair but not pale, and it complements their bright, light-colored eyes.

Beautiful, strong white wings hang on each back. Their wings are thick, larger than I realized, with feathers in subtly varied shades of white. The glossy long quills lie softly together to form a more beautiful version of a swan's wing. Softly pointed ears grace their perfectly proportioned heads. Heads which, along with necks and hands, are heavily jeweled. Each is dressed in finer linens than I have ever seen or touched.

And...are they glowing? Do faeries glow?

No.

There are chandeliers.

Massive yet delicate starlight chandeliers hang along the ceiling every few feet, and lanterns and sconces add more brightness, everywhere. Huge arrangements of pink flowers adorn every available surface and in large vases placed on the floor between sets of doors. Flower trees, hanging flower baskets, flower garlands. All the exact same shade of pink, and all illuminated by a starlight glow.

It is hard to decide what is more stunning—the spectacle before me, or the view out past the balcony railing. Puffs of periwinkle clouds float at eye level. It's like I could reach out and scoop a bit of cloud into my hand. The sun is about to set, and the first few stars are glowing, sparkling so close, my breath catches. Where is my stomach? Still not present.

“No bile from you, little one? Impressive,” murmurs the elf. I am about to turn to him and ask one of two-trillion questions sprinting into my mind. Suddenly, he pulls me down so hard I will likely bruise at my elbow. All the faeries kneel as well, deeply, their heads low. Instinct dips my head down. I hear rustling from behind and began to shake with fear.

“What’s this, Stokker?” A male voice breaks through the silence, the sound like butter and song, deep and rich. At the same moment, a set of glossed boots and a pale pink skirt come into vision before me, as much as I let myself look. Which isn’t much. This is it—I am surely going to vomit now, on this blush fabric that matches the roses exactly and likely costs more than a whole row of human cottages.

“Your Highness, Your Grace. If you will, I remembered the King’s desire. It is known the Star Court wanted to locate any humans hiding from Placement.”

“And you believe you have?” A woman’s voice, also a song but older, softer.

“Yes, Your Grace. If it pleases you,”

She chuckles. “You mean if it pleases me enough to put some coin in your pocket.” Everyone begins to rise, and the elf, Stokker, pulls up at my elbow.

I stand to find surely the most beautiful man—male—among any and all creatures on the whole planet. Everyone in view pales in comparison, washed out behind the saturation of him. I am suddenly keenly aware of my mussed hair, sweaty brow, plain dress and tattered, stained, *disgusting* apron.

He surveys me up and down. His light golden skin does not actually glow, but his blue eyes almost shine like starlight. His thick chestnut hair, similar to my own but richer, brighter, is pulled back to show his perfect features. He has a firm brow, a proportionate nose, a cut jawline...he is, simply, perfect. He looks straight into my eyes with a small smile.

“Welcome, my lady.”

“You cannot mean to tell me she’s eighteen,” the female comments beside him. She is also striking, with the same coloring but human-like age lines around her eyes and mouth. She must be many centuries old to have started showing such signs of age. And she actually *is* glowing, from her necklace, earrings and crown. Starlight is somehow *inside* the jewels she wears. I can’t help but stare.

“No, about twenty, I expect, but just let her show you her talent, Your Grace. I’m sure you will be most pleased.” Stokker, the elf so haughty before, is nervous. My nerves tighten even more. The older female considers us and laughs.

“Past Placement age. Interesting. At last! Something interesting!” She begins to turn away with a grin. “Very well, elf. I will tell my son I wish to see this talent during tonight’s ball. If it pleases him, Arian will summon you. Come, grandson.”

Arian.

Her son.

She is the Queen Mother, Queen Eridia. He is the prince.

Prince Aster.

The Star Prince.

My stomach decides, with fervor, to reacquaint itself with my body.

They begin to turn from us, and I can't help but stare at the prince, who nods at his grandmother with a small, curious smile. They walk away, almost floating with their smooth steps. Just before reaching the set of great wooden doors, the prince looks back and catches my eyes with his. One brow raises slightly.

All the doors on the veranda open at once, displaying a great hall beyond with more chandeliers, more flowers, and more faeries. The throngs of winged beauties around us pass into the doors nearest them. I simply watch, as does Stokker. They all move with such poise, such grace, so utterly *not* human.

The balcony empties, and I begin to notice smaller fae dressed in what must be servant uniforms. They bustle along everywhere. The servant fae vary in size and beauty. Some are the size of a small human child. Some are the height of the faeries I'd just seen but with smaller features and scrawny wings. None of the servants have feathers nearly as smooth, fine and bright-white as the larger fae, the High Fae. None of them are as saturated, as spectacular.

The heavy doors all pull closed in unison. The slam they create shakes the veranda. Stokker finally lets go of my elbow to turn and speak to me at the exact moment my lunch shoots itself out of my body and into the base of a towering floral arrangement a few steps from us.

"And there it is." He sighs. He snaps his fingers, and a small glass of water appears in his other hand. I gape at it.

“Listen, don’t ruin this for me, girl. Come drink this, gather yourself, and get ready to dance like you did just moments ago.”

Dance? Here? Tonight?

He continues, “If I *don’t* get a bag of coin for you, it will bode much worse for you than for me.”

What?

I heave into the base of the plant again. What under the stars above is happening?

I stand slowly and accept the water, taking in the balcony once more. Behind us is another balcony jutting off to the left. It connects to a sprawling structure made of shimmering gray stone. Level upon level of verandas, towers, and spires.

My mind rotates through questions like spokes on a waterwheel. *How can I be placed now? Placed where? And why will I be dancing?* I don’t ask the elf, who is pacing up and down the hall beside me. Fear encourages me to run, but I can’t make a plan or react until I know what exactly I am reacting to.

I gather my courage to ask Stokker to explain just as the doors closest to us thrust open.

Music, chatter, and sounds not too different from the tavern float out to us, along with a very small, distinguished-looking male faerie. His tiny frame and puffed chest reminded me of Brodi, but his face is older, regal and serious.

“His Royal Highness, Master of Light, Ruler of Stars, King Arian Raellen of Connestell, will see you inside at once.” Stokker grabs my throbbing elbow and leads me in.

I have read about balls. Celebrations and feasts for the faeries that include dancing and singing. To see one up close is...difficult to believe.

Everything is immaculate and shining. There is no dust, no dirt. The walls are a sparkling light gray stone, the floor is polished white, the tablecloths are white, the chairs are white, and all of it sparkling as if brand new, not centuries old.

Every table has a mound of flowers precisely the same pink. Twinkling crystal goblets reflect the light of the chandeliers, and the silver and gold place settings glitter as if on fire, each object created just to amplify starlight. But I can't quite appreciate anything I see, not with horror and dread pumping through my veins at record speed.

These are faeries. The fae. I am a human. One misstep and I could be thrown like a doll. They could simply crush my bones with their strength. I could be flown over the balcony's edge and dropped to my death, and no one would know or care. All their eyes, fae eyes, are on me. They study me. Some eyes are disgusted. Some are amused. Many are surprised, curious. There are just so many of them.

We wind through the crowd until we're walking directly towards a glowing platform, polished white stone like the floor but with gold streaks snaking though, each illuminated from within. On the platform sits the actual Star King himself. I am grateful I didn't have much ale at

the start of my shift, for it would be escaping down my leg right now. Not the way to meet a fae king!

His features are impeccable, with only the first hints of aging around his blue eyes. He seems kind, strong—not disgusted, as I expect, but he doesn't seem necessarily pleased, either. How is this happening? *To me?*

His throne itself is a heavy solid gold with embedded holy stone, all of it emitting more light, just like his crown. His wife and soulmate Queen Crystelle sits to his side. Her fair coloring and stunning features bear resemblance to the prince, but her lovely face is currently twisted up to show clear distaste. She looks like someone has led a filth-covered pig right into the center of their party. The Queen Mother sits on the king's other side, amused.

The murmurs die down as the servant stops and proclaims before us, "Elf Stokker of the East Range." Stokker pulls me into a deep kneel. All the starlight in the room dims, save the chandeliers over us.

"Your Majesty," Stokker barely gets out. I say nothing. Are humans allowed to speak directly to the king? I doubt it.

"This is most unusual, elf," the King responds, his voice similar to Prince Aster's but rougher, deeper. He sighs and smiles. "But as this is my dearest Mother's birthday celebration, I will oblige her and allow you this spectacle." A thrill runs through the crowd. "What is the skill?"

"Dancing, Majesty." Everyone scoffs.

"Dancing? How ever did you discover such a talent?" King Arian is genuinely interested, while his mother seems positively thrilled. His wife deepens her scowl.

“At a tavern, Your Excellency. Please, let her show you.”

He considers Stokker’s plea. His mother whispers something in his ear. Finally, the King resigns himself. “Very well, we will clear a space, as Mother wants a true show.” The King of the Stars rolls his eyes at his mother. What a very human thing to do. “Take the girl to be cleaned, and dress her to dance. You may wait in the hall.” A small, thin faerie—a handmaid, I guess—appears at my elbow a moment later. Stokker thanks the king and leaves with me.

It appears elves may scout for the king, but they cannot attend his parties.

The handmaid takes me out through a set of doors behind the throne. I observe a bit more on the way out, including mounds of food on table after table. There is food enough in this hall to feed every human in Raetown for days. Beyond the quantity, the smells are so rich and delicious that my mouth and eyes water. I would be angry about the obscene display if I had a minute to even think before she whisks me away.

Wait. Is that a full orchestra sitting in the corner...Creator Above! A full orchestra! I’ve only ever read of them in books.

We pass into a hall resembling the balcony but without the flowers. Then we pass through a door, but...not a door. It looks like a normal wooden doorframe, but it greets us with a rush of wind. I feel the hint of a twirl still twisting in my body as we take a step from the hallway into a bedroom.

Is it still called a bedroom if the space is bigger than my family’s entire cottage?

Heavy wooden furniture lines tall walls made of the same sparkling gray stone. A bed with posts has its own ceiling of draped fabric. A large dresser sits by a desk, a set of chairs are arranged by a fireplace, and there are multiple standing mirrors. Everything is upholstered in gray and silver and varying shades of blue. The large window in the far wall promises a spectacular view, but I don't get a chance to look because the handmaid guides me through yet another door off to the side.

"There's no time for bathing miss, but if you want to clean up just a bit, I'll pull out some clothing for you." I barely hear her voice. Because the bathing room has an actual bathtub. The size of my bed at home. I force myself to look away from it to the polished stone sink. There I splash my face and try to steady myself.

I leave the bathing room determined to ask the maid some questions but...I am distracted by an ensemble of fine clothing floating in the air before me.

Just floating, no hanger, no string.

The hovering clothes aren't true dresses but rather a blouse and pants combination. The fabric looks buttery soft and thin, with flowing strips attached in places. These clothes could have been—maybe are—made exclusively for dancing.

"What color would you like, dearie?" The maid snaps, and the clothes change from gray to blue, blue to green.

A third voice causes us both to jump. "Green. Definitely green."

I turn to the doorway and there, in a giant bedroom off of a long hall in a palace in the capitol sky city, is Isa.

CHAPTER 6

Shock upon shock charges through me until I'm shaking. My lifelong best friend, years gone, right here, before me. She looks prettier than ever, her brown skin glowing, dark hair thicker. Even her eyes seem to be a darker, richer brown, and her...

Her ears are stretched up on the sides. My best friend is a faerie? No, not possible. "Thank you, Fawn." She nods urgently at the handmaid. The petite faerie maid nods back at Isa with a small smile.

"Isa? What, you're...?"

She steps to me. "Jay, do you remember 'The Hobbit's Cry'?" Surely her ears are a costume, a disguise. Maybe the look of human servants is so offensive that she is made to dress up. Her lovely face is pleading for me to focus, but I am struggling. "Jaylyn? 'The Hobbit's Cry'?" I blink back at her—this is too much too fast. "The song we learned in our last year."

I nod and close my eyes. Fawn snaps and replaces my tattered dress with one of the dance robes, now a warm green color. While Isa talks, Fawn moves her hands around my face, almost touching me but not quite. It's odd. All of this is odd.

"I asked the maestro to play that for you. But Jaylyn, look at me. Jay!" She is intense but not unhappy. "The better your talent, the better your chances at Placement."

"But what does that—"

I register a knock, and Fawn interrupt us. “We’ve been summoned. Now.”

“Jaylyn.” Isa grabs my hands in hers. “Dance for your life. Do you understand? You dance for your life out there. Do not hold back. Do not! Do you understand? Jaylyn!”

“Okay! Okay. I understand.”

I do not understand.

Her urgency is scaring me, but her smile reminds me that Placement is the goal. *Placement!* Dance for my life so I can be Placed.

They start to shuffle me out of the room, and I barely catch my reflection. We don’t have a mirror at home, and I can’t remember the last time I saw myself. My mousy hair has become a golden brown. The green of the fabric brings out the green in my eyes, perfectly. I am still no Isa, not my mother, but I look lean and strong.

In the dress that is not a dress, I actually have a figure. Fawn has rouged my cheeks and altered my eye lashes. I have more color in my skin and a gloss on my lips. I actually feel fit for the King, as much as a human can.

Thank Creator, since I need to dance for my life, Isa said. Why do they want me to dance? Why do they even care?

We whoosh through the strange door, and once I’m through it, Isa is gone. A sentry stands facing Fawn and me. He is large, even for a faerie, wearing light armor, a helmet, and no expression on his face. He carries a long sword that must be part of his standard garb and not for guarding me. An elephant needs no sword against an ant. He turns and leads us back down the passage.

In the hall, all the big sparkling eyes glue to me as soon as we enter. Murmurs follow us back to the king's platform, where tables have been moved to create a large space for me to dance. The orchestra has moved up front, and the maestro is poised with his baton, ready.

The King holds papers in his hands, barely glancing at me as I am presented again before him. I can't help but notice the prince standing between his parents. He gives me a small smile. I want to stare at his lips for a moment, but Stokker is off to the side, glaring. He's threatening, but also, he's afraid. Next to him stands the sentry and Fawn...when did they leave my side?

I am alone.

"Jaylyn Hoste. Of our very own Raetown."

He is reading a file on me. *There is a file on me*, and the King of Starlight is reading it. I blink hard to make sure I am awake, alive, that this is all real. A dream—or nightmare?—come to actual life.

"Decent breeding for humans. Do you know of her father the colonel?" The king turns to the prince, who shakes his head. The King continues, "Only two siblings, however. Your parents will be glad for the Placement, then." He looks at me with a piercing gaze. It is intense but not unkind...I don't think. "Creator's favor for you, girl. Begin."

Begin?

The room goes dark except for small dim lanterns in the orchestra and one bright prism of light on me. I am not only alone but I am on display. I remind myself to breathe. I have never danced under a spot of starlight before.

Dance for your life. Dance for your life.

I raise my chin. This is my domain now. This floor, this light. I flex my fingers to stop the trembling and move to the center of the space. The stage. *My* stage. I outstretch my hands, tilt my head, point a toe, and make eye contact with the maestro.

The music swells as faeries eat and drink and whisper. The King said this was unusual, that they want a little show with their meal.

A show I will give them.

“The Hobbits Cry” starts soft and mysterious, so I begin the same way, small but precise. I don’t miss a half beat. My face is blank.

Hobbits have become legend, like bygone mermaids, shifters, dragons, and unicorns. It’s said they still live in the hillsides outside each town, but I’ve never met anyone who has actually seen one. The start of the song presents a slow riddle about them.

More instruments join to explain the hobbit has been seen, discovered by a beautiful female elf in his hidden shire. In the second verse, they fall in love. I smile, hoping the faeries know the words, as there is no bard singing with the orchestra. Even if they don’t, the music—and hopefully my choreography—explains the plot. The song swells as I cross the space with joy, grateful to be a hobbit finding his love.

But the hobbit’s elf is captured—she cannot stay in hobbit lands. My face falls as the music turns from pink to blue, warm to cold. No more forks clinking now. No one is

murmuring. This is a feeling I know well. I let myself go wholly into the music.

I don't see the faces as I spin, a hobbit searching for my lost love. The song builds again, a melancholy cry, as the hobbit finally follows, finding his love in the mountains, only to realize she's moved on to another. She not only chose an elf over him, she never loved him at all.

I give myself over to the emotion. I become agony. All the terror I feel, the confusion, the anger, the dread from the last day, I put them into each slide of my foot. The building notes ring out, and tears find my cheeks.

Gripped in despair, I fall on my knees with the last chord and stab my hands as if putting a knife in my heart as the hobbit takes his own life. I freeze, my heartbroken face gazing up into the spot of starlight.

The room is locked on me as the prism of light fades and the chandeliers glow again. No one breathes. After an eternity stretched over a few seconds, eyes shift to the throne. The room will not respond until the king approves—or disapproves. Panting, I dissolve my pose into a deep kneel before him, head down.

“My, my,” the king finally whispers. His wife beside him reveals nothing.

“Aha! Lovely! Simply delightful!” The Queen Mother loses all composure. She is tickled, as if she's just witnessed a puppy perform a trick. The room begins to relax and agree with polite claps.

What does this reaction mean? Do I get to live? Will I be given a job now? Can I look up at the throne?

“What say you, Mother?” The king asks Queen Eridia, a smile in his tone, as if this is all a game.

“Congratulations on your Placement, girl.” The room offers a more rousing round of applause. I look up and force a smile. I hope a smile is appropriate. Should I say thank you? Dare I ask what Placement means, and what mine will be? Should I beg to go home? What a terrible time to lose my quick mouth. Although I *do* want to keep my tongue intact and, again, not die.

“Son, my king, humor me and send the girl to my tower to wait for the ceremony. She is easily the most interesting creature I’ve seen this century.”

“We’ve done nothing else about this as usual, Mother, so why not? Take her to the Queen Mother’s rooms.” He waves a hand, and the crowd turns away, moving on to things more interesting than the fate of a human. An attendant gives Stokker a small velvet bag as I lose sight of him. I am not sure if I’m relieved to lose him or not. At least I could speak to him without fear of dying.

A sentry comes to gather me, guiding me away as the orchestra starts up again. The grand party is right back as it was before. Am I dreaming? Did I not just dance for my life? Is some fae magic making me invisible now?

Perhaps, as no one pays me any attention while I am led out—except. *Him*. His eyes, the simmering pale blue eyes of the prince himself, never leave my gaze. His small smile remains.

I wonder what terror comes next and if, somehow, the prince might save me from it.

CHAPTER 7

We step through a windy door to a sitting room with overstuffed chairs and couches in pastel blue fabrics. Starlight shines in more sconces and lanterns, reflecting off of the silver-gray walls. This room is carpeted, with more identical pink roses in vases around the room. It also has much larger windows looking out, unbelievably, into Raelus. The king's sky city.

I am in the King's sky city!

I gawk, frozen stupid and silent once more. The sentry turns and takes up his guard post outside my door. To keep what out? To keep me in?

“Your room is this way, miss.” Fawn leads me into a bedroom fit to match the sitting room. It is a bit smaller than the last but with another set of chairs, a fireplace, and more grand windows. No dust, scratches, or tears mar a single surface.

She opens the large wardrobe to stare at its empty interior with her hand on her chin. “Let's see...you'll need night clothes, undergarments, day clothes, more dance robes, and a few formal gowns, just in case.”

In case of what? I couldn't possibly need a ball gown to be Placed. Placement is a career Assignment, after all. Isn't it? Instead of finding a means of productivity below, we serve the fae in their own cities. So why had I just danced my heart out, and why would I need formal gowns? Do barmaids need fancy gowns in the clouds? Maybe they do.

None of these thoughts reach my mouth, which hangs open.

Because she snaps her fingers and the wardrobe fills with all she mentioned and more, by the looks of it. Fawn notes the shock, fear, and confusion on my face. How do they *do* things like this? I remember Sari and her assistant tailor's job. Perhaps these garments had been right next to Sari below and now with a snap they are up in the palace? *Wild*.

"You'll get used to it quickly, dear. Placement ceremonies happen every week or two, so I'll be here to attend to you until then, as I can." She waves a hand, and the bath starts running in the next room.

"Wait!" Finally, my vocal cords remember themselves.

"Sorry miss, but I must attend to the Queen Mother and all her ladies. Wash. Sleep. Her Grace will not call on you until morning." And then she's gone.

The door shuts behind her with a loud thud. So. Sometimes the doors are magic and sometimes not.

Now I truly am alone.

My thoughts form somewhat coherent streams as the shock subsides.

Fear gives way to anger.

Stolen. I have been stolen! Just snap, grabbed from my life like those garments. Clearly, a human life is of no consequence to these people—these animals. And what was that about hiding from Placement? I was *rejected* from Placement. Now they decide I am exceptional after all?

Maybe this is a chance.

A hint of relief breathes over me. After all, this is the ultimate human goal. Mother and Father will get compensation for my service up here. I've made it into the sky, and I will not end up as a lifelong breeder.

Relief is quickly threatened by anger again as I think of the breeding centers. The big secret below. What other giant secrets do the fae have? This is all so strange. The queen said ceremony. It seems a big fuss for a measly human. Is my new profession going to be that important?

The bath stops running on its own. Unsettling.

But stars, if it doesn't look inviting. We only have the small wash basin at home...if I am stuck here for weeks, I might as well make the most of it.

The bath water is so soothing, it can't simply be water. It must be mixed with oils and salts and tonics and other wonderful things I can't name. I stay in for ages until I realize, with a start, the water never cools. It stays at the same just-right temperature.

Unsettling!

I get out and put on a sleeping gown. It is dark out now, but I am not the least bit tired.

Oh.

I am starving.

I ate so little earlier, and what I had eaten left me and dove into that plant pot. How can I be petrified within an inch of my death *and* be hungry? I can make it to morning. But will they even feed me breakfast? Perhaps humans don't matter enough to get fed regular meals.

I try to rest, to stretch, to busy myself and ignore the hunger. But my thoughts keep flashing back to the feast in the ballroom. A hungry rage boils inside me at the injustice of it, until a knock on the bedroom door almost shoots my soul right out of my skin. Not knowing what else to do, I simply open the door.

The sentry holds a large silver tray full of covered dishes.

“Thank you!” I gush, forgetting myself in my great relief that they won’t let me starve. Someone somewhere is thinking about my tiny human self with my little human needs. My guard barely nods as he hands off the tray and returns to his post outside my door.

I take the food into the sitting room and collapse onto the softest chair I’ve ever encountered. Soft, but oddly shaped. Of course, the thin back accounts for their wings. Just smelling the food is helping my fright-addled brain.

On the dishes I find meat, potatoes, beans, greens, berries, bread, and—my heart nearly stops. *Butter*. We could never afford butter. There is even a cinnamon pastry.

Perhaps being stolen is not the worst fate after all.

I almost miss the delicate vase holding a strange twisted green flower. It is unlike a round rose or daisy. It looks more like a bird taking flight, and it smells divine. I look across the room as I eat—and notice. The flower is the exact shade of my dance robes—and my eyes. Exactly the same.

Isa.

Only Isa would think to do this, to send me food and try to cheer me.

And thank Creator she has. I expect the food to be, say, soul shatteringly delicious. I am absolutely right. I chug the water until drops fall down my chin. But the glass never empties. The wine glass stays full as well.

Now *this* is magic I could get used to.

The Whistler could use it too. So much wonder up here, kept from us. The thought disgusts me, but not enough to stop me from eating. Hot sustenance beats out self-respect, yet gain.

When I've consumed every crumb in a fit of true panic eating, the terror of the day returns. All the questions weigh down my eyelids.

As I grow more tired, more of the room's lanterns go out. The curtains close themselves during one of my long blinks. What a strange new world I am in. The room is alive, watching me. What, I wonder, is the nature of my room? Is this a friendly room or a sinister room? Is it reporting my every action to someone somewhere?

No, I doubt that, because no one here would care what a human is up to.

Especially not one who's gone completely mad, thinking her room has a personality. Creator save me.

I collapse into the sheets, soft as the melted butter I just enjoyed, and though my mind races quickly through the day's revelations, exhaustion is faster. And good that it is, because the revelations are only just beginning.

CHAPTER 8

Pop, pop, pop.

I wake to Fawn's snapping. Curtains open. Water runs, clothes float in the air. The lush pink roses are immediately refreshed in their vases. It is light outside but the sun is barely rising. I should be in the middle of a deep dark sleep, my body says. Then my mind remembers where my body lies and the creatures surrounding me. Suddenly I am sitting up and bright as the sun itself.

"Come, miss, Her Grace wants you to join her in the sitting room for breakfast!"

I stand so Fawn can hover around me snapping, brushing, and tugging. Within seconds, I am totally made up. I wear a silky-smooth dark-green dress without much flair. A nice day dress, Fawn calls it. "Quick, dearie, go in and sit and wait. Do nothing but wait."

She gives me a light shove.

I enter the sitting room and, as is fitting, I sit. I start to yawn but then I hear that sound.

A whooshing noise greets me before I see the Queen Mother in the doorway. I stand, staring through the opening behind her where I can vaguely see...outside? A garden of some sort.

She follows my gaze. "Portal doors, girl." She chuffs and crosses to sit in front of me. "Do they teach you nothing of us below?" She waves her hand, and trays of food float from the cart on the far wall over to the low table in front of us.

I try not to stare, I really try, but I fail. The Queen Mother chuckles again. “Stars, they must not tell you anything. Magic, child, it’s ma-gic.” She over-pronounces as if I am a child. “Oh, no, you’re not daft, are you? I was so hoping for some stimulating conversation.”

Breakfast is off to a wonderful start.

“N-no, Your Majesty. Not daft.”

“Splendid. And it’s Your Grace. His Majesty is only my son.” She isn’t upset as she explains, more like a teacher reminding a student of their lessons. “Eat, girl.” She is a force, even though she is thin and her wings sag a bit behind her. I start to obey and reach for some berries, but she speaks again. “Tell me, how did you hide from your Placement?”

I straighten. Perhaps she can finally explain things to me.

“I didn’t, Your Grace. I...I was rejected.” She gives me a doubtful look. She waits and raises her eyebrows for me to go on. “I wasn’t striking enough in looks, talent, or academics.” What more can I add when that’s all I know? “Um, most...most in my school weren’t chosen, Your Grace. It’s common.” She waves her hand, and a couple of the dishes vanish. Just gone completely from the table. I am gawking again.

“Hmmm. Tell me what you know of us, the fae.”

“The fae are our generous leaders, providing starlight to our world, and King Arian the wisest and kindest of them all.” I recite. I copied that sentence hundreds of times in my childhood handwriting exercises.

“No, no, not the standard lines from your teachers. Tell me, what can I do, other than float plates to the delight of my breakfast guests?”

The old lady is truly enjoying this. I have to turn this back around to what she—what they—are going to do with me. *To me?*

I gulp. “You are in the house of Stars, so you can manipulate light and lightning and starlight power.”

“Correct. And?”

I plead with my memory to throw me something, anything. Fae...fae...fae...“Fly! You can fly,” I almost shout. All faeries can fly. What an idiot. The teacup vibrates in my nervous hands. “Sorry. Sorry, of course, all of you can fly... with, with your wings...perhaps I am daft after all,” I mumble into my tea.

She laughs a big, genuine laugh. “I won’t bite you, dear. Calm yourself. Go on and tell me the things *all of us* can do.”

“You’re basically immortal, you’re strong, you have keen senses, your skin heals itself, and you can disappear and... reappear? Move yourselves through space?”

“Sift, yes.”

I start rambling. The floodgates have opened. “And I guess make the tub to fill itself and maintain its warmth and change how doors work. And the maids can simply snap things—”

“Snap things?”

“There were no clothes in my wardrobe, and she snapped and dresses appeared.”

“Aha, yes.” She laughs again. “For a moment, I thought Fawn was hiding that she was a mighty warrior, snapping beams in two!” I laugh at that, since Fawn comes up to maybe my chest, and I am not particularly tall.

“Your Grace, can you tell me—”

A knock at the door cuts me off. Then the door opens, as a normal door, to reveal the prince. The air leaves the room, or at least it abandons my lungs. I do manage to stand on instinct. Then I kneel, on instinct.

“Good morning, Grandmother. Oh, uh, yes, of course, you have a guest.” He extends a hand to pull me to my feet. “Lady Jaylyn,” he says, locking those piercing blue eyes onto mine. They shine like the expanse of the sky has been collected inside a fine gem. He is just as dashing as the night before but in a less formal jacket, his huge bright wings tucked close to his back.

“Oh, yes, *of course*.” Queen Eridia exaggerates the words. “I’m *sure* you just *forgot*, as it is your custom to join your ancient grandmother for breakfast before the sun.” Her eyes are positively twinkling. She is likable, but her tone makes it plain I am just a plaything in their world.

The prince’s hand is warm and firm, and it’s still holding mine. I look down at the contact. He pulls away slowly and turns to give his grandmother a small, tight laugh.

“I was up early and knew you would be too. I thought I would say hello.”

She stands and smiles at us. “Well, I must be away already, I’m afraid. The ladies of court like to start morning gossip just after sunrise, you know.”

“I do,” he mirrors her warm smile back to her.

She adds, without looking back, “I trust you can see that my guest is entertained.”

She disappears through the door with a whoosh, and now it’s just me, standing inches from a fae prince. Fear is still pulsing softly in my veins, but his face isn’t threatening.

Neither is his voice as he says, “Congratulations.”

For what? But I don’t dare ask. I don’t dare say anything, in case it ends up being the wrong thing. Then I remember I should probably respond when spoken to.

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Oh, just Aster, please.” His eyes crinkle at the sides. I bow my head, doubting I will remember to call him by his first name, ever. “I’ve not seen a ballroom so still in a decade. Even when Father is on an angry tirade, people tend to keep chewing, at least.”

I look up and almost laugh. But I am too twisted up to laugh. Stars, how are his eyes so blue? How is his skin so smooth? Am I staring like a twit? I am. But he is returning my gaze.

“You were a sight to behold, my lady.” I look away at that, unsure of what to say. And sure that I am blushing. “How do you find Raelus?”

“Uh, I...it’s hard to believe, Your Highness.”

“Aster. Oh, but of course you’ve not really seen it, have you? Have you been anywhere but the palace?” I shake my head. “Would you like to see it?”

“Oh, yes, of course.” What else can I say? *Yes, but please first can you tell me why I’m here and what is the ceremony and am I in danger of being squashed like a beetle under your boot?*

“I have meetings soon, but I can come back this evening. I’d be happy to show you.” I just blink. I think I sort of nod. “Unless you’d rather rest, I understand.” He gives a tight smile. He thinks I’m afraid of him. I *am* afraid of him. Aren’t I?

“No, no. I just...aren’t you terribly busy?”

“Are you worried I’ll neglect my duties, dear subject?” He smirks. Aster Raellen is smirking. At me.

“I mean, *The Prince of Stars* wants to give a woman—a little *human*—a tour? Have cows sprouted wings and learned to quack?”

My stupid mouth!

Thank stars that after a shocked beat, he lets out a small laugh.

“A little human who held the entire high court in the palm of her hand as if it was nothing.” He bows his head and turns. “Until this evening, my lady.” I press my lips tight and bow my head, in shock yet again.

He leaves, and I’m not sure how long I stand there, staring at the door-and-magic-portal. Fawn finally whooshes into the room in a rush.

“Sorry to disturb you, miss.” She starts to gather the breakfast dishes into the cart, talking as she flits around. “Here’s one of my bells. Should you need anything, you can

ring it and I'll come as quickly as I can." She places a small brass bell in my hand and adds in a whisper, "But Her Grace and the ladies ring theirs terribly often, so forgive my delay."

She turns to leave, taking information, connection, everything with her in a rush. "Can you tell Isa to call on me?" I blurt.

Her face falls. "Oh, she was called away right after your dance, miss. Won't be back at the palace for a while, I should think." And with a whoosh, she's gone.



The hours barely crawl. I review my questions so they won't evaporate from my head the next time I can speak.

What is my Placement to be? What kind of job? When will I begin? *Why* would I? Why am I still in the city at all, is my Placement here in Raelus?

What is "the ceremony"?

And what then, after I am placed? Will I be given lodging, a wage, meals? Surely.

What does Isa do here and why is she pretending to be a faerie?

I spend a good deal of the sluggish minutes simply staring out the window. So many stone structures, castles, one on top of the other below. And walkways, streets, rooftops. I can make out faeries flying in the distance, up, down, in-between, and around the structures.

I, a human, am in a sky city. I am in the clouds. This is the dream, and I am getting to live it. But so far this has felt more like a nightmare. There is so much I don't know or understand, and how much of what I do know is a lie or a half-truth—like the breeding centers?

How much do my oppressors, the oh so generous fae, keep from me? There are thousands bustling about the city structures. It is astounding and troubling, that so many powerful, magical faeries live just over our mortal heads. I conclude that the math works, considering how many goods come out of our factories. The cattle we raise. The sheer number of human workers. The farms below sprawl wide and yet humans can rarely afford any of the fresh greens, if they are even available at our markets.

Anger boils. I remember that my insignificant little life was just plucked, like a pebble from the mud. As beautiful as it is up here, it turns my stomach thinking about the contrast below.

My stomach.

Blast, I've done it again. I ate maybe one berry with the Queen Mother. Will Fawn remember me in her running around? If Isa left, maybe it was Fawn who thought of my dinner last night, and she'll remember a meal for me today. But it is well past the lunch hour now.

I consider ringing her bell. It feels wrong, though, a human ringing a bell for service from a faerie. Plus, she is so haggard from her work already. I pick up the bell and stare at it as my stomach groans, but before I can jostle it, a knock sounds on my door.

Is the prince back already? I check myself in the mirror. I tuck a few stray hairs back on my way to the door. I settle myself. But it's for naught. Because before me is only the sentry again with a silver tray of food. Dishes and glasses and a small bunch of the same green flowers, this time laid with care on the napkin and bound with twine. So, these flowers to match my eyes were not happenstance then.

As soon as I take the tray the door is shut in my face. I'm too hungry to care. I sit and eat, saving half of the soup, bread, and pastry for later. Time barely ticks, Fawn never comes by, and I never ring for her. I decide to stretch and get myself moving. I hum Welton's mermaid tune and practice some turns through the sitting room. Moving my limbs helps my mind sort through what I do and do not know.

I am to be Placed, in some coveted, privileged position. Placement is a blessing and an honor, so this must be a good thing. It must. Even if I've had to leave behind my whole life.

Placement means my family will be compensated. More books and puzzles for the boys, new coats. Maybe even butter.

But I will likely never see them again. Isa has never visited or written below since her Placement, meaning it is probably forbidden. Or that Placement life is so lovely she's never thought to look back.

There is something else, though.

There is some part of this that's delayed my rulers from whisking me off to my new job right away. They are keeping me in a lovely room, not a prison cell. Keeping me

dressed and washed and fed. And someone is giving me flowers...

Oh.

There was only one other than Isa who held my gaze long enough to know the color of my eyes. The small spark of glee at the thought makes me chastise myself. But the spark turns to flame as I go over my questions and wait for dusk.

I wait for him.

CHAPTER 9

The afternoon light begins retreating outside my window, so I wash my face and change into a fresh dress. It's a sheer blue sheath trimmed with a darker blue ribbon. I look at my reflection, my face now without the magic color and gloss, and despite myself, feeling foolish...

I snap my fingers. Maybe the magic is all around in the room and I can wield it too?

It isn't, and I can't. *Daft woman.*

A knock comes from the sitting room door, and my mind does a spin. Nervousness almost overtakes me but I am able to step into the other room.

I open the door and there he stands, regal as ever, but more relaxed. He's abandoned his coat, wearing just a white shirt tucked into tan pants. His hair is still pulled back but a few short locks have fallen into his face. The soft feathers at the tips of his wings seem the slightest bit disheveled, and I could swear his eyes are even more blue than before.

"Good evening," he says with a gorgeous polite smile. I just bow my head, my thoughts already scrambling, from my questions to his eyes to his mouth...

Focus, Jaylyn! Get a handle on yourself!

"Shall we?" He cuts into my self-talk with an outstretched arm.

"Thank you, Your Highness." I loop my hand into the crux of his very warm, very muscular arm. His right wing just

barely brushes my left arm, feeling softer than my bedsheets. I try not to blush as he leads me to the magic door. I fail.

“Aster, please.” He reminds me as he pulls me through with a whoosh. We arrive in the side street of a grand courtyard. It’s empty and quiet, a glowing water fountain before us in the center. He nudges me to the right, out from under the doorway. Then I raise my eyes and know immediately, precisely where we are.

A gleaming silver-gray staircase leads up to massive golden doors, embedded in the base of tower upon tower. Upon tower. I’ve seen this structure in paintings and books and on hung bulletins fastened to streetlamps. The Starlight Palace. We are outside it now, and it is an even grander sight here than from within. It glows and shimmers at the same time. Every window is framed with bulging colorful flower boxes and bleeds out a soft warm yellow.

It sprawls from left to right, but more than that, it looms above. Human buildings are rarely more than four floors, but sky cities somehow build up, up, and up even more. I look but can’t see the top of it. I have no words. He notices and his smile grows.

“My humble abode.”

Again, I am not sure what to say. Am I even me? At a loss for words? What is this sky air doing to my mind, my tongue?

He maintains an easy smile and says nothing as he moves us across the courtyard to the opposite side, to another door. Only then do I notice a few servants, one sweeping

the ground and one flying—no, hovering—above. He has suspended himself like a hummingbird, concentrating on the fluffy blooms in a flower box. He makes subtle adjustments to the blooms, looking very busy.

With a gust of wind, we are in another courtyard, this one teeming with faeries. Some fly overhead, but most in my view mill about on their feet. We walk out into a street of sorts, though not wide enough for carriages. *Of course.* Because they don't use those here. Streets stretch away in all four directions. And skyward.

The fae are moving in and out of shops. I see signs for a market and a tailor. I hear the noise of a blacksmith and the sound of running water. There are the familiar sounds of a tavern, stories above, on a balcony.

I gasp at it all.

There are even two fae children just across the street running, laughing, flying in bursts. They are every bit as beautiful and regal as the adult faeries. No one is hurried, no one looks sad.

Though I wouldn't say they look particularly joyous. Aside from the children, the creatures seem, maybe... bored? I think of the Raetown streets and hold in a scoff. Why wouldn't they be bored when, up here, they have everything they could ever want?

"Raelus Circle," the prince says finally. He must've seen my tiny human brain trying to make heads or tails of it. "It stretches out, down, and up for blocks, and is loud and busy enough that most times I'm paid no mind."

“It’s—” I start. Nearby someone drops a tool with a loud clang, and I jump.

“Come, let’s get out of the rush.” We turn and retreat right back through the same door. We leave the commotion and step into serenity. We’re on a concrete porch within a garden.

Garden is not the right word. Park isn’t either. Neither is grove. But it is a combination of those.

Neat rows of flowers surround a fountain within a pond that is covered with floating plants. Perfectly round trees spot the area like the giant lollipops my brothers always beg for. All of it is glowing with its own starlight somehow. Frogs croak around us and a few birds chirp their last notes of the day. He leads me down a circling path through the hedges to a stone balcony ledge.

“This is a favorite spot of mine in the evenings. It’s such a small plain garden that it’s all but forgotten.” This is small and plain?! He drops his arm as we approach the railing, putting both hands on the stone, allowing me to catch up and do the same.

We must be above Raelus Circle now. I can see the winding, twinkling streets below, all the way to the curved edge of the floating city. Beyond that is only darkening sky, now a dark gray blue. Stars are appearing above, and it is just...just the loveliest thing I’ve ever seen, by far.

I feel him staring at me but remember. I remember this is not only one of my rulers but the prince of princes. King Arian’s gorgeous heir, rumored to be with a different lady every night. Poems have been written of his allure, how the fae females can’t stay away...

“Do your ladies like this spot?”

Stars!

That was supposed to stay in my head, not come out of my mouth. This high air must be drugged with magic. It is definitely going to be the end of me.

“My...ladies?”

I keep my lips shut for fear of making it worse.

He smiles. “So they *do* sing songs about me in the pubs below.” *Shut. Lips shut.* “Mother does push me to court all the high ladies in search of a queen. Soon I must marry, so the courting is an obligation I can’t just refuse, but I assure you...this garden has never looked lovelier than it does now.” His stares at me as he says the words, and I almost faint.

“Th-thank you, for showing me all of this.” His eyes reveal he can sense in my voice the question; why is he showing me?

“It’s my pleasure.” He thinks for a moment. “You were so brave, so resolute, so graceful. I had to see you again, to talk to you. I’ve never seen anything or anyone like it. Not a faerie, not an elf, and definitely not a—” He stops himself.

“A human,” I say flatly, not looking at him.

“I’m sorry for how that sounded. But there you were, so small, powerless, fragile. And yet so strong...breathtaking.” His voice is raspy as he touches my arm gently. I look up at him. What are my questions? They’ve evaporated.

His light-blue eyes are calling like a grand adventure. His smirk, his warmth, his keen attention...I can’t fathom it. No

one has ever spoken this way to me before. He seems almost—in awe? Of me, the unplaced human barmaid?

It's too much.

I pull my stinging eyes downward, back to the incomprehensible beauty below. He pulls his hand away slowly, but his warmth lingers.

He clears his throat. "Tell me about the tavern."

"You...you want to talk about *my job*?"

"Or your family, your life, anything about you. Who taught you to dance?"

Even as a jolt of joy runs through me that he's interested in me, in my life, I shake my head. Because this is just too silly, for us to be standing here in the sky talking about my dancing. It is time for some answers about the rest of my life, about what is about to happen to me.

"Your Highness." I turn to face him, hoping I sound firmer than I feel.

"Aster."

"Uh, Aster. Please, explain to me—"

Darkness.

All the starlight in the garden goes out. The black rolls through the city below. Just for a few moments the world is black. Then the lamp posts and lanterns spark back to life. But Aster's face is drained of its color.

So. Even Raelus is experiencing the blackouts.

That is not a comforting thought.

“Jaylyn forgive me, but we must get back to the palace at once.” He is already walking with a grip on my hand.

“What happened?” We reach the doorway quickly. “What’s wrong? Your—Aster. Aster?”

He has a hand on the doorway, but at the sound of his name he turns and smiles at me. My heart skips at least one beat. *Talk about breathtaking.* His true, broad smile reaches his eyes, and it’s enough for me to hear music and smell daylilies and feel tingling in my fingertips.

“It’s nothing for you to fret over.” And he cups my face with his other hand. Just for a second. Then we are through the door with a gust, and I am back in the sitting room and the prince—Aster—is gone.

I’m left with all my questions plus one more: what is dreadful enough to drain the color from the handsome face of not only a High Fae, but the Prince of Stars?

CHAPTER 10

My body wakes on its own, the late morning sun fully shining. Like a fool I touch my face where he did. Is the tightness in my chest at the thought of him—is this what Sari felt?

Is this why girls turn their lives upside down to marry? To feel this odd feeling again and again? Does this resemble how it feels to have a soulmate?

I rise from bed and notice a breakfast tray sitting on the side table. No flowers this time, and I realize I forgot to thank Aster for them in the first place. *Blast it.*

I eat some of the food and make up the bed. Boredom sets in, with its cousin, curiosity. I look through drawers and find a hairbrush and some normal magic-less rouge, gloss, and powders. I also find some quills, ink, paper, and a few books. Whoever previously stayed with the Queen Mother apparently favored Elven romance. Maybe I will read them later, but now it is time to get myself moving again.

I hum songs and move through my motions, but clarity doesn't come with the steps. Instead, my mind remembers Aster's soft touches, replaying our interactions over and over again. His wing on my shoulder, the flex of his arm, his fingers holding mine, his hand on my cheek.

Ugh, what a silly, stupid human I am.

What can possibly become of this? *He is a faerie, Jaylyn! And not just fae but a fae prince. Of the second most powerful Kingdom.*

And in a matter of days, I'll be off to a new city, a new job, a new life.

Or...

Maybe I could beg the prince to cancel it all and send me back home?

But in truth, I can admit I don't want to go back home, not yet. What I want is more time in the clouds. More time with this lively, strange feeling. More time with him. With Aster.

I take a break from my dancing and pick up one of the books. It's likely not my finest idea, as a human woman infatuated with a fae prince, to read a dramatic romance, but how else can I pass the hours?

The author wastes no time taking the reader right to the action. The hero and heroine are arguing, until rage turns into passion. A pointed kiss turns into a frenzy. His shirt is ripped open, her skirt lifts. Just reading the words heats my insides so that the whole room grows stuffy. His hands move...

Thump!

The noise on the door knocks me out of the author's lusty haze. Thank stars! I can't stay stuck alone in these rooms any longer. I swing the wood open wide with a smile, but before me is just the sentry bearing lunch. I take the tray and as he waves his hand, the breakfast dishes behind me disappear. I take a chance.

"Excuse me, my lord, er, sentry, sir?" *Ugh, so pathetic.* He barely looks back at me. "Can I leave here? Can I explore the palace? Walk outside?"

“Sorry.” He shakes his head.

“Please!” I touch his arm, and he freezes. I immediately withdraw, feeling a rule has been broken. Perhaps I cannot touch a faerie without permission. “Please, maybe they would allow it if you escorted me?” He says nothing and shuts the door.

Brilliant.

I dance. I read. I bathe and dress. I start to go mad in the silence. Fawn’s bell taunts me, so I pick it up. I simply cannot take the stillness anymore. Will she be scolded for leaving her faerie charges to come to me? Hopefully she wouldn’t do such a thing. I would hate to cause her any trouble. She said she’ll come when she can, so after a breath, I ring for her.

I wait.

And wait.

An hour passes, maybe more, before I hear the gust from the sitting room. She bursts into my bedroom with a smile. Is she ever not in a rush?

“His Highness is on the way, miss! Good that you rang me when you did. Let’s get you into a proper evening dress.” And get me in, she does. The purple-blue gown has proper corsets, lace edging, and layer upon layer of skirts. If this is not a full ball gown, I pray I’ll never attend a ball. In between grunts and sighs, I breathe. Barely.

Seeing a rare opportunity, I take a chance. “Fawn, please, what do you know of the ceremony?”

“I’m sorry miss, I’m not allowed to attend.” She is tense as the words leave her lips. Clearly I am not supposed to ask.

“Are you able to talk freely to the Queen Mother?”

She doesn’t look at me as she answers, “Only when spoken to, miss.”

“Please, call me Jaylyn.” She motions her hands around my face again as I plead. “Could you ask her if I can walk around the palace during the day? Even with a sentry? I can’t stay stuck in these rooms anymore.”

She considers it. “I’ll try, Miss Jaylyn. I’ll try.” She snaps two more times and proudly shows me my reflection.

The dress displays more of my neck and chest than have ever been exposed to sunlight. The corset lifts my breasts, and Fawn’s magic has done a small wonder with my features. I haven’t thought much about my appearance before, but being surrounded by so much overwhelming beauty has produced new self-awareness in me. Perhaps in this dress, I can ask the prince—ask Aster—for freedom beyond this room. As long as the request doesn’t make me seem like a whiny child.

As Aster knocks on the inside door to my room, I grab Fawn’s hands and give her a grateful smile. “Thank you,” I whisper.

She must think me unwell, a mortal girl from below trying to look pretty for the Star Prince. But she simply winks and nods.

I open the door between the rooms, and my heart twists at the sight of him. His deep blue dress jacket is stretched across his broad shoulders. His boots are glossed, his hair

perfect, no feather out of place behind his shoulders. But he has a tired expression, like he's spent the whole day in court...doing whatever it is royals do at court.

I give him a smile I hope will lighten the weight on his brow. I don't miss that his eyes dip below my face for more than a second. I flush, and he clears his throat as he extends his arm.

"Can I take you to dinner?"

I nod. "Yes. I would like that very much."

He smiles down at me as we go through the sitting room, where he notices the book on the table. He smirks. "Stimulating reading material, my lady."

"Not mine! It was in the room." But he doesn't reply as we disappear through one of what I still call the windy doors.

We step out into an entry hall. As we turn, I see an open-air tavern. Wooden tables fill the balcony, but none of the tables are lit, save one. Right up against the stone railing, a table for two glows with a lantern and an array of flickering starlight candles.

We are greeted by an attendant, whom the prince promptly dismisses with half a glance. "Leave us, please."

The exchange is a quick jolt, a reminder that I am with a prince. He guides me just to the right of our table so I can see the view. I almost gasp aloud, because he moves closer and covers my hand with his on the railing.

We are on the outermost edge, the very cusp of the floating city structure. We must be, because I can't see any other buildings above. There are only evening clouds. But

below...*I can see below. Home.* I see a grid of roads and buildings that I recognize near the heart of Raetown. I follow a patchwork of green that stretches out to the horizon, farm after grove after farm.

“Aster.” It comes out a whisper. His name is all I can say. He squeezes my hand and smiles that playful smile again.

“Stunning,” he says, looking at me, not the view. “Let’s eat.”

He pulls out my chair for me. I sit, and he puts both hands on my shoulders for a moment. The ends of his fingers brush my collarbones before he removes one hand and motions over my head. As his hand waves, dinner appears on the table. I just stare, no doubt looking dumb, as he takes his seat across from me.

“Sorry, I forget you don’t have much magic below.”

“*Much* magic?” I scoff.

I scoffed! At the prince!

I have got to control myself. Now is not the time to let my quick tongue get away from me. What happens to a human who smarts off to a faerie prince? *Let’s not find out, Jaylyn.*

“You’ve no magic at all, then, in your part of Raetown?” he asks as he hands me a basket of warm rolls.

“Just the starlight. And even that wanes late at night.” I wait for a response, but he gets lost in thought. Maybe royal faeries know as little of their human subjects as we know of them.

“How does it—I mean, did you...make all this food from nothing?” I fumble. I hear how silly and small I sound as the

words came out, especially since I am painfully aware we farm their food for them. But I am truly desperate to know. He laughs a big hearty laugh that lifts his wings behind him. His face lights, and his chest shakes, and I...I forget myself completely at the sight.

“No, no,” he explains as the laugh subsides. “The food was in the kitchen nearby, I simply moved it here.”

“Because stars forbid you have to walk all those steps,” I quip. *Jaylyn!* But he laughs again, thank Creator.

“It uses such small magic, it’s like breathing. I hardly think of it.” On the last word, he flicks a finger, and the lanterns on all the tables around us light. I must look surprised, despite trying to keep a cool expression. He flicks them out again, studying me.

“So, you control the light. And plates. And some of the doors?” This makes him smile in a way that makes me feel stupid and wonderful at the same time. He is like his grandmother in his playfulness, but I don’t feel like a plaything to him. At least not to the same extent. Though, to be truthful, my feelings are a muddle.

“The starlight is part of my power, but the small things are drawn from the magic around us. The doors are made by giving over some power, mixing it with the magic nearby, and creating what’s called *sustained* magic.” Confusion settles on me as I chew the best tasting meat I’ve ever had. I am not sure what kind of beast it is. I don’t think I care.

“Sustained magic means we don’t have to give up a bit of power or use a bit of magic every time we walk through the door. It just stays there for our use. To sift uses power, to

take the doorway doesn't. Many of our tools, utilities, and weapons use this kind of sustained magic."

I say nothing as I remember the bathtub. I suppose that is sustained. I also think of how useful self-filling drinks would be at the tavern. Why can't we have such objects below? Silly question. Humans aren't worthy of it.

"It's fascinating to watch someone see it all for the first time." Aster's eyes gleam.

"You've never been with a human?" His eyes grow wide. I hear myself and fall to pieces. "I mean! Not *been* with. I meant spent time with." He is chuckling now. "Creator save me." I mumble as I put my face in my hands. He pulls my hands down from my face. His eyes met mine and they seem three shades darker.

"No, I haven't been." His voice is low in a way that makes my whole body blush. He looks away and lightens up again, restoring our normal cadence. "I've spent time with human generals, of course. And governors. They're accustomed to us, I suppose. It's always in a serious setting. And I've seen girls come in for Placement and attended their ceremonies."

He says these things as if I should know what he means. I should know what Placement is and how the ceremony proceeds. Tomorrow, I will absolutely have to ask the Queen Mother or the sentry. Or push Fawn again.

"But," he adds, "they are always so terrified and quiet, and not in court for long. I don't have the opportunity to speak with them, or"—he raises his glass to me—"dine with them." I can't think of what to say. "Tell me about your home. Tell me of the tavern."

And so, I do. Various courses of food appear and disappear as we speak. He laughs and smiles and listens. I prattle on without much encouragement, getting lost in funny stories, enjoying his laughter again and again. Enjoying that I can make him laugh. I love the feeling.

Thoughts of Placement and breeding and sunless slave towns nag at me somewhere in the back of my mind. This is one of my winged tyrants, I try to remember. Stabs of guilt pass over me as I survey all the beauty around me. Especially when my thoughts dip to my family down below. But he is being so kind. So normal. And the way he watches me, looks at me, and not just my face, it's so...fun. I am having fun.

Still, I will ask him about it all, challenge him even. Later. Soon. It doesn't feel safe enough yet to unsettle our brand-new friendship. I will work my way up to it.

"Your turn." I finally return his smirk. He tells me bits about growing up as I would have imagined a fae prince grows up. Schooling included book lessons, magic lessons, fighting lessons, and court knowledge. He oversees various parts of the armadas and the elf, human and hobbit governors—hobbits that do still exist! He gives an overview of court business and how he also oversees parts of trade between the seven kingdoms. He speaks so freely, so easily, that I eventually relax.

"So, you can see, my days are kept very full."

"And your evenings are spent with all the ladies."

What!

That's it! No more wine. I am going to be chucked off this balcony for the words I let slip.

“All the ladies? Please, Jaylyn, speak freely, don't hold back your true thoughts on my account.” He is joking but not totally unbothered. I feel awkward that I let my distaste—all right, perhaps it is petty jealousy—show.

I change the subject with a repentant duck of my head. “What did you do for fun when you were growing up?”

He smiles a childish grin and motions his hand. All the starlight lanterns around us go dark, not just on the table but the whole restaurant. And there must have been more light above and below us that has gone out as well. I gawk once more at the table lanterns and candles.

“Jaylyn. Look up.”

Stars above!

Literally.

Overwhelming does not cover this sight, this feeling.

In the total darkness, this high, the sky is too much for my eyes, which well with tears as they try to see it all, see *them* all. So many constellations, so close. Raetown is at a towering elevation, and Raelus atop it must reach out into the atmosphere.

The stars are a million different sizes and not just glowing white but yellow, blue, red. And the velvet sky around them isn't just black—it is deep purple, blue, and in some places brown and pink.

Star City indeed.

I don't realize at first that he's come around the table and wiped away one of my awed tears. I don't turn to look at him because I can't pull my eyes down from the scene. He puts one hand on my knee, I suddenly notice, and reaches his other arm up above his head. He motions down as if pulling on an invisible rope and when he does, every single star gets brighter. A cry escapes my mouth.

He lets out a breath, and I turned to him.

"That," he whispers, "was *not* like breathing."

I certainly am not breathing. His face is so close. I...I...I don't think I can remember my own name. Nerves rush through me with a shudder. I think of what to say, remembering he hasn't answered my question.

I look back up at the sparkling display. "So...at night you'd, what, practice pulling the stars down out of the sky?"

"No." He lets out another easy laugh. "Not usually. And they haven't moved, I just amplified their light for a moment. At night, in the few hours I had to myself, I would fly."

"I've been wondering about that." I look back at him, eyeing his massive pristine white wings. This close, I can see the feathers have tiny silver flecks in them.

He is still winded from his light show as he asks, "Oh?"

"Yes, because when you said you'd show me the city, I half expected you to grab me and leap out the window."

His smirk falls as he looks at me. His eyes shimmer, and his voice deepens. "Do you want me to grab you?"

I gulp. I will my head to nod or speak but I am frozen. Partly because of the closeness of his mouth and partly due to uncertainty. I am not altogether sure that I do want to hurtle through the sky. He is still kneeling beside me. He reaches out to barely stroke my knee with his thumb.

“Yes,” I manage to get out.

In one quick motion, he scoops me from the chair and steps up onto it with me in his arms. He takes a long step to the rail and pauses. In my shock I simply flop like a soaked noodle, so he takes my arms and wraps them around his neck. “Hold on.” His grin has turned devious.

“All riiiiii—” I scream because we are falling. Stars, wings, and skies above, we are falling so fast! He chuckles but I squirm and squeal and shut my eyes. I also grip him for my life. My chest presses up against him, my arms noticing every place where my skin touches his neck. He holds me firmly underneath the knees and squeezes my shoulder with his other hand.

“Open your eyes, Jaylyn. Look!” He is so free, so excited, I have to obey. He throws his wings wide, and we settle into an easy glide around the outskirts of the city. The balcony we leapt from fades away above us and the underside of the city’s edge stretches down below my line of sight.

Raelus is a stone-carved version of my wood and thatch town below, but in a winding shape, two cones spiraling away from each other on the wide end. In a passing blur I can make out more streets and storefronts and what appear to be homes with balconies and gardens. It all glows with starlight, lanterns at every doorway and

window and streetlamps placed every few feet. Flowers, trees, ponds, and pools all glow with their own light.

As we turn and move lower, a whole swath of the structure loses all that light. It's sudden and moves in a line, as if someone has just taken a black brush and painted a wide path across the city. At that, Aster turns from his glide to a flap, and we climb upward. His flapping motion is strange and strong, but not uncomfortable.

He doesn't seem fazed by the weight of me at all. Climbing through the air seems effortless for him, up and up until the city grows thinner. Finally, the palace comes into view, the very top of the whole planet. He slows and settles us with a few steps on a landing ledge, a balcony with no railing. His brow is furrowed—has been for our entire climb.

He looks at me to set me on my feet, and his features soften. His eyes change to that darker shade again. My chest heaves, trying to contain the thrill of the night, of him, all of it.

"I can't believe that just happened." I sound like a child but can't stop myself. He smiles with me. He takes my hand, intertwining our fingers, and leads me to a door.

"It was a thrill for me as well." He takes a step closer to me. "I've never carried a girl. A human girl. A dancing, brave, beautiful girl." Closer still. "You have enraptured me." He lets go of my hand and takes my face in both of his hands. His bright blue eyes go from my eyes to my lips and back again. His brow barely creases as if he's asking, wondering. To answer, I lean into his hands.

My eyes flutter shut as he comes close and tilts his head. I hold my breath and brace myself as he brings his mouth to mine. His soft lips press, sure and firm, and linger for a moment. He opens his mouth on mine. It's just a hint before he pulls back. I find I'm still leaning into him as he pulls away.

"I'm afraid I am needed." His eyes take in every feature of my face, my neck, my chest. "I will call on you again tomorrow."

With a whoosh, I am back in my quarters, alone.

Tomorrow cannot come soon enough.

Or so I think.

CHAPTER 11

Come morning, I decide that today, when not fantasizing like an imbecile, I will, no matter what, get answers. I'll demand them. It is a certainty.

Until later when it seems the Queen Mother has forgotten her pet. I ring for Fawn, but she doesn't come. In a fit of frustration, I scoot the ridiculously heavy furniture to the side, giving myself more room to dance my exercises. Humming loudly, leaping harder, spinning faster, I feel better.

Lunch comes and goes.

I move the furniture farther and dance again.

When evening falls, I get dressed and prettied as best I can without Fawn to tie up my laces.

But Aster doesn't come. And I should not be so disappointed by his absence. Silly girl.

I stare out the window and review how much things have changed in just the few days I've been here. Which reminds me of all the weary faces, the women vanished. The fact that I was a hair away from becoming a professional incubator.

Rage clouds my view of the city as I consider how close I was to that fate. And then I feel...gratitude. After all, I am in the skies now, no longer facing that grim future. But how many women below are? It is cruel and disgusting, especially since it is kept a secret.

And I've let a handsome prince distract me from the horror that is the fae and their dominion over us. Some friend I am, *a true champion for my race*.

I leap up and start again, thrusting out my arms and singing all the words I know. I launch myself into the anguish of The Hobbit's Cry. I sing and dance every angry, heartbroken song I can remember in an effort to work out my feelings.

Of course, only once I am truly sweating with my hair half fallen down and my skirts wrinkled, does a knock come to the sitting room door. I push back my stray hairs.

But again, it is just the sentry.

"Dinner, miss." He steps in quickly but does not carry a tray. He closes the door behind him before opening it again with a gust. The doorway now leads to a courtyard. I look to the sentry, who ignores me and steps out, resuming his post.

I suppose I am to follow. I take a timid step out and see the glorious stars above. With a deep breath of fresh air, I almost moan my thanks. "Yes! Creator bless you, Fawn!" I say the words to the sky, my arms spread wide. Ah, to be out of that stuffy room!

"A half-hour," The sentry grunts, disturbing my reverie. The patio is simple and dimly lit. A few large potted trees surround a rectangular fountain lined with flowerbeds. By the fountain is a set of stone benches and table with the silver dinner tray upon it. I uncover the dishes and sit. I start to eat, but even the rich flavors can't keep the continued silence from gnawing at me.

“Am I...allowed to talk to you?” I ask the sentry, mid-chew. He says nothing. He doesn’t even move his eyes from their stare straight ahead. I consider him. “That is not a no.” Again, nothing. I suppose he is rather good at his job.

“I’m Jaylyn,” I continue, then wince. He probably knows as much already. And maybe he can’t talk back to me, but what if he is required to pass on anything I say to his superiors? Will he report me for talking out of turn? No, no one up here cares about the babblings of a human.

I might as well entertain myself.

“Let’s see. What could your name be? Garfankle. Patricia. Skallywompus. Bob.”

No movement in the sentry, not even a facial tick. Ah, then, this is to be a challenge. I press on.

“You must be a very poor sentry to be stuck guarding a human.” No deep breath, not a blink. “Couldn’t you get a better post? Here you are with little, insignificant me. As if I even need guarding. I can’t very well leave without wings.”

Eyeballs completely straight. I grunt in disgust, defeated. “All right, then. Just a silent dog following his master’s orders.” I remember the sentries I’ve known. “Same rubbish as all the soldiers below.”

I don’t try to talk to him anymore.



Another day passes. I am going mad with loneliness. Despair is overtaking me to the point that I consider

tearing the dancing robes apart, just for the release of some of my anguish. Dancing isn't enough anymore. Fabric in my hands, ready to rip, and the sentry appears with more food.

Thankfully, I am permitted to venture outside again. We sit and eat in that same small courtyard. Well, I sit. The guard stands like a tree. This will not do any longer. I am a barmaid. I've tamed drunken beasts and charmed bitter, angry sods. Silent ones too. I must make a friend of this beast so I can have someone to present my questions to.

"So, Quiet Mountain Male, what do you think of a little human getting all this fuss from the Queen Mother?"

Nothing.

"What do you think of the starlight going out?" I chew in the silence. "What will you do if I throw a grape at you? I have fairly good aim." I lob the grape at his head, and it bounces off his helmet, right by his eyes.

A smile!

He looks at me with a closed grin, small and fast as a blink.

"HA! You smiled! I saw it!" He is frozen again, eyes forward. "No, don't try to go back to granite, you ghou. I saw your mouth move!"

Stone again.

"Shall I throw all my grapes at you and starve to death?"

I pretend to throw another. He doesn't flinch. He gives away nothing else. The rush from the small victory fades. I eat the rest of my meal in silence, every bite tasting like lonely disappointment.



Thank Creator, Fawn comes in the next day. She is breathless, explaining the whole court is in a frenzy. She makes sure I understand that the king *and prince* were called out of the palace but have now returned. I nod and smile at her kindness with that tidbit of information.

The sentry and I have a late lunch in the courtyard, to my overwhelming gratitude. I welcome the sun and the crisp spring air. I'm happy for anything to distract me from the storm of emotions about the prince, even if it is a mute winged effigy holding me prisoner.

“Shouldn't you have a partner?”

I no longer wait or hope for a response, though I still watch for one as I ramble. “Don't sentries work in pairs? I bet your partner got a better station. I bet he's by the king's side right now, slaying an enemy of the court in the middle of the throne room, the crowd going wild for him as he lifts his sword in a rush of glory and honor.” I jump up to act out the scene, including the cheering crowd. It's ridiculous, but it doesn't even earn me a glance.

“And here you are in the flowers with a human woman. Oh, maybe he's put down his sword, your former partner.” I find a particularly funny thought. “Yes, he's become the *ultimate* servant. Now he fetches the king his wine. His lordship can't very well fetch it himself...yes,” I say, chuckling, “imagine your former partner in battle, now fanning the king's face with wane branches. He's at the

king's right hand now, feeding grapes one by one into his majesty's big, fat, lazy mouth!"

He gasps. "Blast it, you can't talk about the king that way!"

"Aha!" I laugh hard at his shocked, twisted features for a moment before he sets them back to stone. Stone that is just barely, *almost* smiling. There's definitely a smirk. He lets it linger for a moment. "So you *do* know how to string multiple words together. I'm proud of you, Silent Sentry."

I wonder if it is his first laugh in a while, like the sentries and farmers and workers at the Whistler. My smile fades.

"Time to go," he says after I've stared at him too long. Soon I am back in the sitting room alone. I stay awake at the window, waiting for Aster, again. He doesn't come.



Time crawls and the days bleed together. A morning passes my window without a word from Aster or Fawn. I read for a while until the light implies the lunch hour is coming to a close. I am starting to get that twitchy, restless feeling I would get at home—of being trapped. Because I am undoubtedly a prisoner.

A prisoner going weak in the knees for her handsome captor. Her captor who kissed her and forgot all about her for days. Pathetic.

I was wrong about the lunch hour, according to the arrival of my armed guard. I am feeling too melancholy to spar with—or rather, at—him. I am grateful, though, for the

fresh air when he whooshes me to the same little courtyard. I look to the table, but this time there is no tray.

I turn to look at my warden, but he keeps walking. I don't bother asking after him because he won't reply. For a moment, I wonder if he might be allowing me to try to flee, but then I remember. I am in, essentially, a stone square box, within a looming stone palace, floating in midair. There is no fleeing. I simply follow.

Around the back corner of the square, in what I had thought was just plain wall, I now see a small door. He has to duck to get through, but it is plenty big enough for me. Without any breezes we step into a small dim space lined with bookshelves. The shelves are tall and packed, and I notice, for the first time in the sky, it is all coated with a thin layer of dust.

The air is still and old and laced with mildew. The sentry walks around the bookshelf before us, leading me to a brighter space with more bookshelves, farther apart. I can hear shuffling of stacks and the rustling of pages.

A library. This has to be a library. Then with a turn we are in a bright, open atrium and...stars above!

CHAPTER 12

Library doesn't seem a sufficient word for this space.

I stop walking involuntarily. There are six stories of bookshelves towering above us on all sides. Straight overhead, splattering thousands of rainbow prisms everywhere, is a large domed sky window. It must be made of crystal with how it gleams. Like everything else in this palace, it glows and sparkles and shimmers all at the same time. It is mesmerizing.

As I stare at it, I see a book pass within my line of sight. A book just...floating through the air. I hear them, then, books darting from carts to shelves. I don't see a faerie anywhere pointing or waving. The library is empty. I shake my head. Why do these beasts need humans at all when they have things like *self-shelving books*?

As I spin to absorb the wonders around me, I spot the table with my lunch tray. I put it all together and my heart swells. Aster saw me reading. And he gave me green flowers. And he kept getting me out of that stifling room each day for lunch. He hasn't forgotten me.

I feel a bit lighter as I sit at my little table. I turn to the sentry back by the shelves, who is a tree once more.

"Thank you for the escort...Sir Boulder Bottom."

Nothing. But after Aster's thoughtful gesture, I am feeling somewhat chatty. I explain to the statue that I would give my limbs just to see the children's lesson books in that library, for my brothers. I tell him all about my quest to push them to become geniuses, to get them Placed. The

sentry now knows more than he ever wanted about me and my brothers.

After I finish eating, I walk over to a bookshelf and touch a spine. As soon as my finger hits leather the sentry is upon me. He grabs my arm, and not gently. "Time to go." He drags me quickly through the books like I've broken a rule. I probably am not allowed to touch certain books, to read freely.

As soon we are outside again with the door shut behind us, the sentry is back to his hard, cold, immovable self. "What, can't let humans stay too long in the library? Can't let us get too smart, is that what it is? Need to keep us nice and dumb down below, right? You evil, giant, flying rodents!"

He does not engage with me as we walk back around to our exit. I cut myself off, remembering he is still, in fact, a faerie soldier. He could turn me in to the king for saying such things. I hold my lips together and simmer until we reach the door. I glare up at him and risk it, feeling the need to let him know how I feel about him and his masters. "You disgust me."

With a breeze, I am back in my room, alone.

And not nearly as confident.

What kind of twit snarls and pokes at her captor's trained guard beast?

Blast.

I'm going to die before this supposed Placement ceremony ever arrives.

The afternoon passes, and still no Aster or Queen Mother. I wonder if she even remembers she has a human girl down the hall. And, more painful to consider, has the prince grown bored of me? He's just let me see the library, yes, but it has been three days since he's called on me in person. Maybe my guard has told them of my tirades. Maybe my ceremony, whatever it is, has been cancelled.

My thoughts return to Mother, Nohem, Brodi and even Father. I can't bring myself to read or dance anymore. Finally, after days of building turmoil, I weep. Not a tear but a deluge. My heart has been straining to hold it all in. I decide to let it all out. Uncertainty, anger, regret, fear, loneliness. I get up in search of a kerchief and notice an envelope on the floor.

Isa has sent word! Or Fawn, perhaps? I doubt the prince would slide a note under a door. But maybe he would?

I pick up the envelope. It isn't a letter. It looks similar, but the paper is folded like a parcel to be opened. I pick at the junction in the center, and the paper opens itself. Music fills the room.

Startled, I clamp the envelope shut. The music stops. I open it again, and the orchestra plays on. I don't recognize the tune, but it is lovely, with great rhythm.

The prince, Aster, is still thinking of me after all, sending me what I love most—dance.

I let the magic paper sit open and create a sequence. It is a jovial tune. I smile as I imagine performing it alongside Sari and Welton, stomping across my beloved wooden stage. I let my pain and fury out through every wave of my hand and spin of my toe. It feels so wonderful, the rhythm.

Having music is like having a piece of home with me. I dance the tune over and over again.

Dinnertime arrives. I greet the sentry with an apologetic nod, not only concerned for my future but also feeling badly about my outburst. He is only doing his job, after all. I thank Sir Snagglewing, but he takes no notice and doesn't stay long enough to play my game. Which is probably for the best.

I sit by the window again until late into the night. I am about to give over to fatigue when there is a knock, finally. As soon as I get up from my chair, Aster bursts in.

"Jaylyn, I'm so sorry." He crosses directly to the window and gathers me into a tight hug. "I was called away from the palace. I couldn't come."

"It's all right—"

"It's not all right." He lifts my chin, and I tilt my head for him. When his lips meet mine, he opens me up right away. His tongue awakens me, shakes me, pleads with me. I return the kiss with a plea of my own.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here," he breathes. "I'm sorry." His kiss transforms from a question to a demand. I reach up and grab his shoulders, and his lips move from my mouth to my neck. "Creator above, your scent, Jaylyn. You're killing me," he murmurs into my collarbone. He pulls away long before I want him to.

"Eat with me? I know it's quite late, but I'm famished."

"All right," I say so slowly the words have a million syllables. I am having trouble even moving my mouth. Is my mouth on fire? Am *I* on fire?

I must not be as he takes my hand with a smile. The portal door takes us to a stone balcony furnished with comfortable chairs and low tables. He waves in some bread, cheese, fruit, and wine. He makes some light jokes, but I can see he is pensive.

“Aster, what’s wrong? With the starlight?”

“No one knows.” It is a heavy, frightful statement that settles between us. Feeling the weight of it, Aster shifts, visibly reverting to his smooth light-heartedness. “So of course all the lords and ladies are up in arms at us, whining to Father. *What’s this Arian, they’re your stars, Arian, fix it, Arian!*” It is a hilarious, snooty impression. I’m struck again by how easy he is to laugh with.

“Do you like your father?” I wonder aloud. What must it be like to grow up with Arian the Great?

He nods slowly. “He is a just king, a good father...and he gave me such dashing good looks.”

I roll my eyes with a mumbled, “Oh stars, spare me,” and throw a piece of bread at him.

He puts on his best shocked face. “A human just threw food at me.” I laugh and wince, realizing I have possibly—probably—gone too far. His voice is lower, softer. “You’re lucky you’re so unbelievably stunning, Jaylyn Hoste of Raetown.”

I flush. If this is what courting is, I have been a fool. I feel alive, excited, awake. I feel wanted, and I want more. I want to see more, feel more, all my senses. This is sensational.

“Care for a flight?” he asks as he sets down his goblet. I nod enthusiastically. I know I should ask him about the

ceremony and the breeding centers and so many things. But I am a total fool around him. A fool *for* him.

His load is heavier than he lets on. I don't want to spoil how wonderful things feel in this moment. He gathers me below my knees and around the shoulders and takes off. He flies low so I can make out almost all of town. He holds me tight through our short flight, laughing and enjoying himself.

After we land back on the balcony, he mutters, "It's quite late." He sounds unsure of himself, for the first time. He pauses before deciding to lead me through the door back into my sitting room.

Once through the door, he changes his mind again, turning back to me. He takes a large step and wraps me in a grip. He kisses me differently, with a vengeance, a demand. It is amazing to feel so totally wanted, needed. And I feel the need for him too. Immediately. I reach up and put one hand in his hair and the other just barely on his wing, and he becomes ravenous.

We are a tangle of tongues and hands, touching every part of each other through our clothes. I don't remember my questions, my past, my future. I don't think of my humanity or captivity. I think of Aster and Aster only.

I have never felt anything remotely close to this in my life. He picks me up and wraps my legs around him, walking through the side door to the bedroom. He lowers us down gently onto my bed and kisses at my neck, saying my name over and over.

He looks into my eyes, slowing his actions, and I nod.

With a motion of his hand our clothes are on the floor. His fae body towers over me. It is as gorgeous as his face. He's lean, muscular and perfect. I can barely admire him before he's back on me. And in me. Splitting me in two.

I cry out as he answers the ache deep within me, powerfully. Maybe too powerfully. I am suddenly feeling very human. Under him I feel small and fragile. Too small to handle this. It hurts, but he seems to be out of his right mind. I cry out as he kisses me through the pain, unable to control himself.

He doesn't slow. He showers me with words, how soft I am, how wonderful I smell, how sweet I taste, how different I feel. Being with a human male has never felt this...much. I feel so desirable, I am able to start ignoring the pain and focusing on the pleasure. But not before he comes undone. The impact of his release feels like I am ripped wide open all over again.

He freezes, muttering more praises, before unlinking us. He flops down next to me, panting. I pant too, trying to slow my emotions and calm my body. The pain is over now. There was pleasure too, I tell myself, but my eyes sting.

I turn into him, eager to nuzzle my concerns away in his arms. But a knock interrupts the moment. Aster curses at the interruption before standing. He furiously waves his pants back onto himself. He stomps to the door and throws it open. I overhear soft low whispers about a starlight outage inside the palace.

Aster shuts the door and turns back, magically pulling all his clothes back onto himself as he walks to me. He sits on the bed and leans over me.

“Is everything all right?” I ask, knowing it isn’t. But I don’t know what else to say. I try to sound concerned instead of angry. I’m still in a bit of shock, and fully disappointed that our moment has been stolen away by the stupid stars.

“Yes, it’s fine, don’t worry. I will fetch you for dinner tomorrow.” He kisses me on my forehead quickly before leaving through the sitting room.

Alone again, I lay reeling.

That was...a thrill. But also, a whirlwind. It was quick and almost brutal. Then he was gone.

New questions arise.

Do I even want my Placement? Do I want Aster? *Can* I want Aster? Can Aster want a human? If he does, what then? As happy as I am for the excitement of his affections, and for whatever is growing between us, something in my gut is hesitant. Wary. And weary.

I try to sort my thoughts, but sleep carries them all away.

And I need the rest for what is to come.

CHAPTER 13

ASTER

I consider killing the sentry who knocked on the door. He's larger than me but I can blast him with my light where he stands before he can lift his hands to fire back. I barely refrain. And he can't use his powers at will in the palace anyway.

Fortunate for him that he knocked after the act and not before. Still, I wasn't done for the evening. Not at all.

I stomp down the corridor to the throne room. I'm sure my father's advisors are there, pacing and arguing. They'll be staring at the ceiling or studying the lantern or muttering questions up to the sky.

As they have been for decades.

The starlight has been flickering *for decades*.

Worsening every year. Something is amiss, and everyone looks to Connestell to fix it, as they always have. For decades.

I, on the other hand, only wanted this one night. Not even a whole night, just moments. That's what she gives me, pockets of sweet distraction.

I wasn't planning on taking her. She's a guest, she's scared, and she's going to be Placed in mere days.

But blast me, she is provocative.

I don't know if she means it, though her quick mouth suggests she does. Even if she doesn't, that's all the more intriguing. She looks and smells and feels so...fascinating. I am *fascinated*.

She's like a little walking, talking, dancing drug, delighting and intoxicating me. She's unlike, so *very* unlike, the fae ladies that frequent my arm. She's curious and funny and, well, human. Not much interests or delights a centuries-old fae female. Except perhaps the chance at a crown, fame, riches, the trappings of court. Hence their interest in *me*.

Part of her appeal must be that I've not spent much time around mortal women. The few I have encountered have been so young, so afraid. Jaylyn is altogether different.

So, I wanted just this. This night. A few precious hours with her to breathe, away from the suffocation.

The pressure is so stifling, I am unsure how Father bears it.

It's not only the starlight.

There are the graglins too.

Graglins above ground? In groups? Making coordinated attacks on livestock?

Something in the realm has gone very wrong. Or something across the whole planet, it seems. More reports come in from far and wide, every day. Daily outages. Daily graglins. Water that stops running. Portal doors that close.

And we have not a clue what is happening to our star or what to do about it. We also don't know what happens

when the light flickers out and doesn't come back. It will be the end of us. Of all the realms. All the realms that look to us for the answer.

Except for Zaynr. Another weight to add to the growing load.

For years the Soul King has spouted off about his hatred of Father. He's disagreed with every position we take. He's sabotaged our efforts, tortured our spies, launched thinly veiled threats. Now, as everyone else grows loud, he goes silent. Our few remaining spies tell us Neymu has its own outages too, so why isn't he reporting them?

Father has been waiting for some vengeful plot due to their centuries-long feud. But Zaynr hasn't put any troops in position to launch an attack. To do so would be futile anyway. The High Council would never stand for such a war. Especially not with the magic failures across every realm.

So where is the so-called King of Darkness, and what is he hiding?

It's of no matter right now.

Right now, I must focus on reviewing all the starlight reports. Right now, we fix our magic. Right now, I must focus on the tasks at hand and not the warm, beautiful, fragile creature I just left alone in her bed.

I was not finished with her. I want more. Much more.

But I fear our time together, like our night, is about to be cut short.

CHAPTER 14

“Up, up!”

Snap, snap.

I wake to Fawn’s fussing. And to a soreness I don’t think I mind. Otherwise, I could almost convince myself our union last night was a dream. What a frenzy. Aster had wanted me so, and I wanted more. I *want* more. I will simply have to make that happen again tonight.

“Up, up you get, Miss Jaylyn.” Fawn hustles as only Fawn can. “Her Grace is on the way for breakfast!”

“Are you all right, Fawn? You didn’t come...”

“I’m so terribly sorry.” Her face looks distraught. “The lords are in for the ceremony and some generals as well. And all of them with all their ladies. So many ladies! It’s been a whirl, miss, a whirl.”

I feel for her like I feel for my mother. Does this faerie ever rest? Her wings sag, and her thin hands are wrecked with callouses and scars. So. Some faeries *do* wound and scar. I’m not sure what to make of that. She seems always just slightly afraid and totally spent, yet always smiles.

“There we are.” Fawn practically shoves me into the sitting room. The furniture has been put back to its usual configuration. I know to sit and wait. The exact moment I settle into a chair, in blows the Queen Mother.

“Morning, my poppet! How do I find you?” She waltzes in and sits as if she owns the room, which I suppose she does.

“Fine, thank you, Your Grace.” I bow. She waves in the food, and I look down, deliberately not staring at the floating service.

“Getting used to our ways, I see.” I look up and give a small smile. Her eyes sparkle back at me. “Your Placement ceremony is tomorrow, girl. So very exciting!”

“Thank you for breakfast,” I squeak out. This is it. This has to be my window. But what am I allowed to ask? To say? They assume I already know so much.

Still. Rather look a fool than stay oblivious. My face must show everything, and she misses nothing.

“You don’t live for millennia and not see when someone has words inside screaming to get out. Speak freely, girl.”

“Do you know where, exactly, I’ll be placed?”

“Stars, of course not. Only Creator himself can know that,” she huffs, but I don’t try to hide my confusion. She shakes her head. “I must make an effort to speak with humans more than once a century, honestly. Tell, what do they teach you of Placement below, dear?”

“It’s an honor and a privilege to be chosen for a station in the clouds, to serve the fae in a sky city.”

“Station?” She tilts her head slightly.

Please Creator save me. She *has* to know more than I do. Anything. This torture of the unknown has to end.

“A job in a city. I don’t know what mine will be since all I’ve ever been is a barmaid. Maybe I’ll be a barmaid here?” I search her face, but it has gone blank.

“A...job,” she finally repeats before exploding in dismay. “You’re about to become immortal, child! What absolute rubbish! Poppycock! Tomorrow will be the best day of your life!”

“Im-immortal?”

“Yes.” She lists the facts plainly. “You’re brought to the skies, then turned, and Creator reveals your fae soulmate to you through the Holy Fate Table. This should be known—I cannot believe this isn’t known.” She sips her tea as my entire world smashes to bits around me.

“Turned?”

“Naturally. We wouldn’t breed with humans.”

It is good I haven’t eaten yet. My insides become a writhing twist of confusion and fear. I find my voice, but it’s garbled. “B-br-breed?”

“Honestly, dear, keep up. Fate reveals your soulmate upon the holy stone and, of course, with your soulmate, you will breed.” Each word she lands like an arrow of dread and nausea straight into my gut. “All the unmated lords attend the ceremony. If your soulmate is in the room, he’ll take you home, or on the occasion it’s someone else, the lord who presides over that male will deliver you.” She says something else about how happy it is, how lucky and blessed I am.

But the walls are closing in.

I can’t breathe.

I can’t see.

There's only black.



When consciousness returns to me, I am on the couch with a cool towel across my head. The sitting room is empty now, but water and crackers sit on the side table.

As if I could eat or drink.

Breeding!

My head throbs. Of course this was all somehow, still, always, ever about breeding. What is with these creatures? They can't let an ounce of smarts, an inch of good looks or spark of life linger among humankind. Anything good or lovely they have to snatch up for themselves.

But that doesn't quite make sense, because if humans are so lowly, why mate with us?

Turn them and mate with them.

A human can be turned into a faerie.

I am to become immortal.

What if I don't *want* to become immortal?

Isa!

It wasn't a costume. Isa is truly a faerie. But without wings. So, no flying. But what of magic, of power? Perhaps Isa has magic and can use it to get me out of here. Although I'm not sure where I can go. Is there any better option for me than what waits for me tomorrow?

The more important question arrives with a pang. *How is a human turned?*

And Aster knows. He's known this whole time. He's said nothing of saving me, or claiming me, of delaying my ceremony. But he assumes I know I'm about to be turned.

Immortal.

Forever.

Forever a breeder, just not in a center. Forever up here.

Forever with Aster doesn't sound all so frightful. But what if he isn't my soulmate? What if fate assigns me to someone else?

No, not *assigns*.

It sounds as if my soulmate, my fae soulmate, is already out there, to be revealed by the holy table. *The blessing of blessings, to find your soul's one true love.* That is what I've heard all my life. I've never really wanted it until now.

But.

I don't want *whomever* is out there for me. I want Aster. It is clear he wants me too. And he is the prince.

Surely, he can simply claim me. And surely he will. Why else would he have laid with me last night? Though, I would've thought he'd say something, anything, about our souls. Am I just a plaything, after all?

In my head I twirl rapidly from anger to fear to hope and back again. Through each turn, I am also suddenly lonely. Painfully, desperately lonely.



I don't know how long it is before I hear the gust. I don't turn. I am not about to stand or curtsy or bow. I maintain my stare out the window. The beautiful animals who rule over my life will get no respect from me.

"Jaylyn! I came as soon as I could." He crosses over to me and kneels by my chair. "Look at me. I thought you knew. I thought you knew!"

"Knew? You thought I knew and I just, what, wanted a tryst in the sheets with you before becoming someone else's soulmate?"

"It wasn't just a tryst."

"Is it so exotic, to be with a human? Did you tell the tale to all your under-lords? Congratulations, Your Majesty, on a new prize!"

"Jaylyn, stop." I do, but only because tears well and I am not going to let them spill over in front of him. He reaches for me but doesn't touch me. "I didn't expect to...well, to *feel*. I haven't felt anything real in decades. Please, believe me. You rushed at me like a storm...I was overtaken." I turn back to the window. "Say something," he finally pleads.

I don't look his way. "Stop it. Stop it all, and send me home."

"That's not possible. Even if I tried, Jaylyn, you'd be found and...they would end you."

"Your father is so cruel, so greedy, and so hateful of humans, he would send his armada to find and kill me?"

I can't believe that. Arian's face seemed so kind before. He is supposed to be beloved, progressive, friendly to his human subjects below.

"No, Father wouldn't, but others would."

Fantastic. Just fantastic, this fae world.

"So, I have no choice? Become a faerie or death?" I lay my head on my arm on the window ledge. He says nothing. Maybe he's never thought of it that way, never faced the ugly truth. He puts his hand on my back, but I shrug it away.

"How. How does one get turned?" I demand.

"You lay on the holy stone, the fate table, and all the high lords and ladies of Connestell send their power through you. That much magic is transformational, so you take the form of your makers...if you can."

What?

I look up, and he immediately explains. "You will! Some humans—only some—can't bear the power, but Jaylyn, you're so brave and strong. I have no doubt. Most humans can hold it, and they aren't nearly as extraordinary as you."

Some humans can't...

I spring to the washroom and vomit. The sink cleans itself in an instant as I sway there, gripping the sides of the marble. Aster stands in the doorway.

"Tell me how to help you, Jaylyn, please."

I can't seem to move, frozen to the sink. "How does it work? The table just reveals my new master?" I croak, terrified.

“Master? No. Not your master. It will be your soulmate. Fate’s table is made of holy stone. It is divine, and the magic is centuries old. It was carved out with hope. It transforms with wisdom and kindness. It is a treasured tool maintained by priestesses to put new fae in their right places, with their soulmates. The fated mates live long, warm, loving lives together. Humans who transform, the made fae, they aren’t unhappy here, Jaylyn.”

“What if I already have a human soulmate below? What of him?”

His face gives away that he does not like that idea. “Do you?”

I let him wait before replying. “No, but what if I had? It just seems cruel.”

“I’ve never once heard of a made fae not desiring their revealed mate.”

“And you—how come you haven’t found your soulmate?” I blurt. I am tempted to simply say that I hope it’s him. But we haven’t even known each other a fortnight. I want to ask him to claim me. I want to ask what he wants, but the thought of asking him outright is almost as terrifying as the table itself.

He ignores my question about his mate. “Jaylyn, the thought of you with someone else...” My eyes flash down to his fists, balled at his sides. His white knuckles confirm what he’s saying. He does want me. I am filled with relief and irritation at the same time.

“So?” I shout. “Then do something! You’re the prince, Aster!”

“I tried to delay your ceremony. I did. I talked to my father, his advisors. It’s way, way beyond me. There’s nothing to be done.”

I feel a wave of nausea again and turn to the sink to splash my face. The water sputters and then stops with a loud clunking sound that starts above us and travels far below our feet. At the same time, all the lanterns lose their starlight. When they flicker back on, Aster is looking up. And I can see it clearly this time. He is scared.

“Aster, just tell me. Why are you so worried about the starlight?”

He turns to go but looks back at me. His face looks ashen. “I don’t know if I can come back before the ceremony tomorrow, and...”

“Aster, tell me what’s going on!”

“Listen, Jaylyn, please. You must rest and eat. Gather your strength for the table. I will try to come back before. I’ll try.” He comes into the washroom and quickly kisses my forehead.

I beg him. “Aster!” But he is already through the door.

CHAPTER 15

After some time of shuttering and stammering by the window, I get up with purpose.

I will run.

I try the window openings first. They are sealed with magic, harder than stone, even though they appear as open holes in the wall. I know I can't just turn the handle on either of my hallway doors. I will have to get the sentry to open my door. Then I'll bolt.

I am quick and surefooted, so I can run the halls until I find a servant. Maybe I can find Fawn, or someone, to use that evaporating magic and whisk me back below. Once I'm in the halls, I can try passing through every magic door until I am anywhere else. But the doors aren't always portals, and likely won't work for a human alone. I have no magic. If I can't open my door to the hall, I probably can't open any doors.

But running through the halls is worth a try.

I change into a dancing robe and rip off the flowing ribbons. In just the pants, I will have full range of motion for whatever I face during my escape.

I knock on my bedroom door, hoping the sentry is there, as always.

"Please, can I have some wine, for my nerves?" No sound. I pull on the handle, still useless. "Please, your silent lordship, I beg of you." I hear a rustle and ready myself. I

may be scared, sad, angry, and nervous, but I can channel all of that into my feet. I will need the speed.

The door swings open, and I jump back a step. The sentry has a glass in his hand. As he moves to hand it to me, I look to his side at the gap in the doorway. My escape. I leap.

Directly into his wing.

In a mere second, the wine vanishes and he's steeled himself at the threshold. His legs are planted, one giant arm on each side of the door. His wings are spread wide and low, blocking any gaps between him and the hallway behind.

I lurch down to go under his feet and crash into his leg. By the feel of it against my head, he actually is made of stone. I can't help myself, so used to human men, I actually try to shove him. Shoving a mountain would be more productive. I dart left. Feathers. I shift right, solid arm. How can he be so huge and so fast?

He doesn't even look down at me. He must be a totally lifeless statue, transformed by magic into a guard. I shove again, yelling in frustration, as tears build up.

I decide to try bargaining. "You can disappear, can't you? Or take me through the doors? If you can just get me below, I won't tell anyone, I promise." I loathe how pitiful I sound, begging this lifeless, cruel beast. "I won't say it was you. No one will know. Have mercy." He begins to force me back into the room with his form. "Please," I sob. He still doesn't bother to look down as he pushes me backwards into the room. His hateful avoidance of me, his dismissal of me entirely, sets me off.

“Blast you, you spineless winged weasel!” My words are barely intelligible through my sobs. “I hate the sight of you. I hope you get shot in the heart! I hope you get captured by graglins and eaten alive!” He doesn’t react as he shuts the door in my face.

I had hope before that door opened.

It’s gone now.



Hopelessness eventually gives way to anxiety and rage. To keep from madness, I heave the massive couches and chairs out of my way. I open the musical envelope and let it play over and over. I dance out my emotions and sort through my thoughts.

I will never go home.

Unless I want to be hunted down and killed.

Which is heartbreaking.

Welt, my brothers, Barta, Sari.

Heartbreak.

I dance it out.

I will become immortal.

I will live for eternity as a wingless faerie.

If I don’t die on the all-knowing table.

Terror stabs into me with each note of the music. I might die. Which infuriates me. I have done nothing. I did not ask

for more than my small, simple human life. They should've left me alone. Curse Stokker and the Queen Mother and everyone else on this star.

Through this torture, I will find my fae soulmate.

This is my holy fate, revealed. It is supposedly Creator's will, which is kind, wise, and true.

It could be Aster.

Then I suppose I will be his princess and his queen.

I don't want to be a faerie queen.

Confusion and dread.

I dance them out.

I do want Aster.

And I very much do not want to die.

I keep dancing.

Eventually I notice evening has arrived outside the window. I eat the crackers and drink the water, which is, mercifully, in a self-filling cup.

I dance again until my feet hurt, and my head feels dizzy. I stare and cry and rail until darkness falls. Late into the night I sit there, glaring out at the city shining below. Aster never comes.

When I turn to collapse into my bed, I see a tray of heavier breads, meats, and cheeses. I didn't even hear a knock, but I am too tired and scared to be curious anymore. Barely one bite of cheese and sleep comes to meet me. I should eat more. Aster warned me. But my weak, human body doesn't listen.

I will regret that choice tomorrow.

CHAPTER 16

Fawn's bustling wakes me again. It is not the early hour of the Queen Mother's breakfast, but not yet afternoon.

"Morning, Miss Jaylyn. Time for brunch and then your ceremony!"

I snap upright. "Already?"

"Got moved up, not even time for a bath. Kitchen's buzzing about the generals, so it must be on account of them. Let's get you fit to become fae, shall we, miss?" In seconds she is squeezing, smearing, and snapping.

"Fawn, do you..." but then she is out of the room. She hustles back to my side, so I restart. "Fawn, please," but then she is piling a mountain of skirt over me. "Do..." She is clearly avoiding my gaze. I start again. "I know you haven't been to the ceremony, but do you know any human faeries? Have you heard any rumors, *anything*?"

"I'm sorry, dearie. We're not told much about it. It's court business. I only know sweet Isa, and just barely. You're the first human I've ever waited upon." A worried smile crosses her face. "Think—in moments, you'll be immortal, and you'll know your soulmate!" I can sense she doesn't know quite what to say.

She fusses over my hair one last time. "Be sure to eat up in the ballroom, but don't mess my pretty gloss." She grabs both of my hands and looks to the door as if someone might be coming. She stares into my eyes. "I'm not sure our paths will cross again, but I hope so."

As she leads me to the doorway, I catch her work in the mirror. My face looks its best again. I am wearing a flowing gown in layer after layer of soft, thin fabric. She has chosen my now-signature warm green color, with sparkling pearl trim. Tiny jewels and pearls stitched in clusters all over sparkle as I move. It is a truly lovely dress.

Will I die in this dress?

The sentry is waiting for us. I am a bundle of nerves, about to start babbling, but he takes a quick turn, and we are back on the grand veranda that leads into the ballroom. Between us and the ballroom doors, open to what sounds like a ball already underway, is a line...of humans. Placed humans. A few human girls in pretty dresses stand before me, with more arriving behind. The king's announcer calls out something, and we start to file into the ballroom. I hear tame applause inside. It is a smaller affair than the Queen Mother's birthday, but just as opulent.

In the ballroom I see the throne right away. In front of it sits a long table with twenty or so chairs. Its polished light wood is beautifully laid with flowers and place settings. So...this is a party for us. We are prompted to each stand behind a seat as the king rises and the room grows still. I see the Queen Mother and the queen, but no Aster.

“Honored guests, the High Council has found you to be exceptional, extraordinary, exquisite! Well done! I am delighted to bring you into our beloved fae kingdom today, where you were fated, where you belong. Creator give you favor in your ceremony.” He raises his glass, and the throng of faeries in the room joins him. He lifts his voice, “To the strength of Connestell!”

The crowd answers the call back to him. He waves his hand to reveal yet another garish display of food down the long white tablecloth covered in porcelain, gold, silver, and crystal. A servant at the end of the table motions for us to take our seats.

The fae have taken up their chatting and eating, in contrast to those around my table. Every human is frozen, staring in awe. They look like children, just barely eighteen years old. And all girls, save two boys at the far end of the table who are so tall and strong they could almost be fae already. Of course. Cannot have human men passing on such good strong bloodlines to their own race. Perhaps I don't want Brodi to fill out into his stocky build after all.

The humans look simultaneously happy and petrified. Eyes dart around the room, trying to absorb it all, just as I did. They are whispering in amazement about the food, the ball, the blinding beauty surrounding us.

Before we can begin truly talking amongst ourselves the crowd quiets for the orchestra. Out comes a bard, dressed in a crisp beige suit that probably cost more than everything Welton owns. He takes position near the throne and begins singing. His voice is perfection, clear and pure and loud, demanding our full attention.

Of course, the songs drone on and on about the glories of the wonderful fae, how lovely it is to be in Connestell under the great and benevolent King Arian. The crowd cheers and claps in a way that implies they've done this many times before. Given their ages, they've probably literally heard the songs hundreds of times. I don't envy the bard his job.

When he finishes his few songs, our plates disappear. The king stands again and proclaims, “From her loveliness, soul of my soul, star in our skies, your gracious Queen Crystelle, gifts!”

A gift box appears in front of each of us. Before I can reach out my hand, my box opens itself. More gasps echo around me. Inside the parcel is a dainty string of starlight pearls. In shades of green to match my dress, they dazzle. I’m not sure how the fae harness the power of our world into jewelry, but I can’t look away from their beauty.

When I put my fingertip to the jewels, they instantly vanish and reappear around my neck. I glance up and see Aster in my line of sight, standing apart from the tables to ensure that I’d see him. He gives me a wide, sneaky smile, as if maybe he picked these out for me. Blast that smile.

Servants at the ends of our table gesture for us to stand, and one by one, faeries come to offer each of us a dance. I can feel the stare of hundreds of eyes as the prince of stars himself saunters over. He offers his hand to me.

“May I?” I give him a slight bow. “Though I might not be able to keep up with you.”

“I’ll hold back,” I snipe. It is so easy to be with him, even now. And skies above, does he look handsome in his dress suit. We begin to dance an easy waltz.

He stares.

“What?” I smile, forgetting again that I am angry and scared and bitter.

“You look radiant. Just devastating. I can’t take my eyes off you.”

“Your mother’s eyes on us tell me you most certainly should not be dancing with me.”

“I am breaking some rules, yes.” He tilts his head, and I feel myself tighten. He can break *some* rules, but not all. He tries to keep the discussion light. “Couldn’t just let you dance with some old codger from the court.”

“I’m about to do a lot more than dance,” I mutter. I know it stings him. His turn to tighten up as we twirl. We are quiet for a verse. I’m aware of every place our bodies touch, where his arm holds my waist, my hand in his. The song is coming to a close, and I don’t want to leave him this way. I muster my courage and look him in the eye.

“I hope it’s you.”

He doesn’t balk. “I hope so too.”

With that soft admission, the song is over, and we are frozen. I know by how he looks at my glossed lips that he wants to kiss me. I know we have a million more things to say to one another. But he walks me back to the table, squeezing my arm in his tightly.

I look at my table mates as I rejoin them. All of them are giddy and glowing in their new jewels. The boys have been given cuff links, and each girl has a necklace or bracelet or earrings. They—we—have been welcomed, prettied, fussed over, and shown magic. We’ve been given food that tastes better than anything we’ve ever dreamed of. We’ve been dazzled with a party and given exquisite gifts. We’ve gotten to not see the fae, or actually touch a faerie, but to dance with a fae lord or lady, glowing and graceful.

Not one of the young, vibrant humans around me looks scared anymore.

How many of them will die on the table later today?

I am sure many of them, like me, have no idea what they are about to endure. As they look around in excitement, my warm feelings for Aster fade behind my decision. My mind is set. This is unjust, unforgivable. We are pigs being fattened for slaughter. We are a gift to the fae, simply being wrapped in pretty trappings.

And I am going to let them wrap me and slaughter me.

Because I have no other choice.

After, whatever my new role is in their world, I will sneak, steal, or spy. I will scream, plead, beg. I will plot, plan, or whatever else it takes to change the laws. To end the breeding centers. To get the truth out down below. Somehow, I will change things so that a bright eyed young human girl is never forced onto a glowing table ever again.

I almost laugh at myself as a servant herds us into a line because I am not a fighter. Not a smooth manipulator of the court. Not a leader. But I will do it somehow. Aster is good and kind. He will help me—I know he will. And if not Aster, then surely whomever my soul loves will love my kind. Will want to help his mate. Even if not, if I will have to find a way all by myself. I will do it.

If I live.

They forced me up into the clouds. I will find a way to either lift up mankind alongside me, or bring the fae world crashing down. A simple human barmaid from the dust below will be paid no mind. Let them underestimate me.

We are led out onto the veranda. The humans split off, and the sentry is back by my side.

“You’ll wait your turn in your room,” he informs me.

My turn.

One after the other, we will climb onto some ancient mystical slab and try to survive. Try to “hold the magic,” whatever that means. Upon returning to my glorified cell, panting and bewildered, I see a tray on the table. There is a glass of water, a single green bird flower, and a folded note.

I have cherished my time with you.

The table will be excruciating.

It will seem to last forever.

Clear your emotions.

Let the magic in—don’t close up.

You can withstand it, even if you doubt.

You can survive it.

Please, you must survive it.

Aster. The note is unsigned, but I know it must be from him.

Warmth quells my rage a bit. He cherishes me and wants me to survive for him. He wants me to be his, and I want for fate to tell me he is mine. I hold the note to my chest, tears threatening. I reread it again and again.

Excruciating.

That explains why this is yet another part of our world no one can discuss. It takes effort to keep my food down. Fawn

and Aster both said to eat, but I couldn't stomach much at the reception. Stars, I hope I don't die covered in my own upended filth in front of a host of fae.

After almost no time, the knock comes, and the sentry is back. He offers me his arm instead of shoving me along. I assume his sudden gentleness means he knows what I am about to endure.

We breeze through to an empty passageway. I see no other servants or sentries. There are no windows, only a stretch of walkway lined with plain wooded doors.

I look up to the faerie marching me onward. The sentry says nothing and shows no expression. My nerves run away, right through my mouth.

"Well, this is it, Sir...Sombersnout. Just a human walking to her probable death? I wonder if I'd even make it to the end of the hall if I broke into a run?" He tightens his arm but says nothing. I let the overwhelming fear and sorrow escape through my teeth. "A simple maiden sauntering to her end. Can't stay human, can't be sure I will live through turning. What a lovely thing, fate. And all with the escort of a cold statue-beast." It is easy to channel everything away from the situation, my destiny, my fear and send everything straight at him. With fervor.

"A massive flying rat bag. At least now you'll get a better post, Fae of Stone. You must be getting teased mercilessly in your barracks...wait, do you go to your barracks? I can't say I've ever seen another sentry. Perhaps sentries have magic that keeps them from sleeping."

We are almost there. The last door at the end of the hall, obviously our destination. My arm in his trembles, but my

mouth goes on. “Perhaps sentries have no magic, so you *can’t* disappear here and then reappear somewhere else, the Queen Mother explained it but I forget what it’s—”

“Kal.” He doesn’t look down, doesn’t slow. “My name is Kal.” For the last second of our walk, I am strangely calm from the shock of his confession. Then we are through another wind door.

We step into a circular chamber, surrounded by raised seats. I can see two dozen or more lords standing and chatting but no other humans. They don’t seem to notice me come in. Ahead, in a ray of focused starlight, I see a table of the glowing blue stone. It is a rough, simple slab that looks as old as time itself, even though it gleams, covered in carvings etched in the stone.

I shake, trying to focus on maintaining control of all my bodily functions. I spot Aster walking down from the seats to the center floor. Seeing him builds me up. I think of his note and blink hard.

I can survive this. I will survive it.

The sentry leaves me standing beside the table as a priestess comes from behind. She takes my hand without a word. The female has a calm, open face. Her presence soothes me some, as priestesses are loved on Loya. They are gentle, wise, kind. They take in the needy in their temples, live a life of service, they are even seen in the streets below with human children, laughing and singing.

This one looks even older than the Queen Mother, which means she must be nearing a thousand years old. Her flowing robes and hood of deep blue are adorned with

many chains, set with glowing star jewels. Her wings are gray and sagging. She says softly, "Onto the table, dear one."

I climb up a few steps carved into the table and then sit on the glowing stone. I thought it might be warm or cold, but all I feel is a slight tingle below my thighs. She gently guides me with her hands to lay down flat. I am ashamed of how badly I am quivering. My teeth chatter in fear, and she hasn't even begun.

I look to Aster. His sad smile seems bittersweet as he grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze. Then he lets go and leaves my sight. The whole room dims away as the spotlight on me grows brighter. The priestess crosses my hands across my heart. "Don't be afraid, child." Her voice is quiet, rough, and ancient. "Close your eyes and take deep breaths." She places her hands over my eyes, and at the feel of her cool skin, I realize I can't move.

I can't twitch a muscle. I cannot reopen my eyes, can't open my mouth to speak. Tears leak down the sides of my face. To the room, she begins, "Thank Creator, for this gift of life." Many voices join in with her, and panic sets in. My heart pounds in my chest, loud and hard. They haven't even started. *Deep breaths, Jaylyn. Clear my emotions.* "May she be a worthy vessel..."

I can't hear anymore as it starts. I see light approach through my closed lids, brighter than the spotlight. Then there is warmth in my hands and chest. Along with terror.

Not warmth.

It's heat.

Too much heat.

My chest is burning, my stomach...it's spreading. *Aster! Aster!* I can't shout for him. I try to close off the pain, but then I remember his words. I will myself to open up and let go. Every limb feels like it is being pulled from my body. My head can't take the pressure. My fingers crack and even my toes cry out.

I cannot do this. The pain is too great. I am being shredded alive, torn, cut, ripped. I am going to come apart. I will fail Aster. *Aster. Aster. Aster.* I've failed my race, my world. No...*don't close, open.* How do I stay open? In my screaming mind, I try to imagine myself at the end of Welton's mermaid song, on my knees, back arched, arms wide, face up.

I think of my family, of my brothers' faces, of Welton's laugh. I think of Isa and Fawn and Aster.

Aster! Aster, help me!

Open. Let it in. Let it in. Aster!

I scream and shake inside my mind. I curse and cry and ask Creator to save me. I ask Aster to help me. Nothing comes out of my mouth. I can't last much longer—I am not strong. The fae are going to kill me. *Open. Try, Jaylyn, try! Open!* Let it in.

But the pain! Too much pain. Too much. I don't know if he can sense it, but I reach out with all my might for the prince to save me.

Aster...

Aster!

The blinding light grows brighter, and I am torn in two.
Then there is nothing.

CHAPTER 17

Honeysuckle. Cinnamon. Copper. Vanilla.

Tingling in my ears, fingers, toes. Tingling beneath me. And a faint throb all around. Pain? Yes. But also something else.

Mumbling begins, distant and soft, coming closer in waves.

“Very unusual...Well done, Priestess...Much shorter than usual...How can this be, to the prince?...Fate has decided...Congratulations, Your Highness...Prince...”

I startle, unmoving, but wholly feeling.

ASTER RAELLEN. I AM YOURS AND YOU ARE MINE. ASTER. ASTER! WHERE ARE YOU? I NEED YOU. I WANT YOU. NOW! ASTER!

His name fills my being. Like breath. It is a song, a beacon. There is no hint of doubt. He is my question and my answer. Eyes still closed, I search for him with all of myself. I can feel him in my chest.

Aster. Aster is my soulmate. And I want to join with him immediately. I need to. I can sense him next to me.

Black turns to grays, blues, and oranges in my eyelids. I open them slowly.

An arched, shimmering silver ceiling holds a large chandelier, dimly lit. My breath—I am still breathing, after all—hitches. At the end of each spindle of the chandelier is a tiny shining orb of rainbow, blinking, pulsing all colors at once.

I can see...light within light. I can *hear* the light? I hear footsteps and whispers and wings rustling and wind whistling and doors opening and closing. The stimulation quiets my base urges for a moment.

“Breathe, Jaylyn. It takes a moment.” I think I can turn my head. I do. Aster is smiling down at me. *ASTER!* My mate. I need him, I want him, I adore him. My eyes grow wide, as does my smile. But the light, the sounds...my head pounds as if being stabbed with a dagger, the dagger pulling back slowly, and then inserted again. I lift my tingling hand to my forehead.

“It takes your mind a while to catch up to your new fae senses,” Aster explains. I put both hands on my head and then... my ears. Larger now and pointed to a soft triangular tip, not sharp like an elf, but no longer human. I am...fae. I am not myself anymore.

Aster pulls me up to sit. But everywhere he touches isn't just warm, soft, wonderful. Every touch feels like a key fitting a lock. “Jaylyn.” Even his voice is new in my ears. More melodic. Deeper. I don't know if it's my heightened senses or the knowledge that he is, in fact, my soul's perfect match.

He squeezes my hand. I glance around the room, now empty, save us. I look at his eyes, which are kind and intense.

“Jaylyn. You're mine.” He smiles, wide and free.

Where his smiling face before was a shining sun, it's now a galaxy. He does actually glow a bit. His eyes are bluer than my human eyes realized. His white teeth are brighter, sharper. He seems more primal, or maybe that is just my

needy instinct. I stare as he talks. "A human has never been fated to a royal family member. Not once. Everyone is in a frenzy over our match. No one knows quite what to do."

"Some fun for your grandmother, at last," I say, earning a small laugh from him. Grandmother? That's what my mouth lets tumble out as my first immortal words?

Oh.

I am immortal.

I will not turn twenty-two.

I won't wrinkle or lose my sight or hearing. I won't hunch over. Not for a thousand years, anyway.

"Come, you'll be hungry," Aster says gently, and wings above, I am hungry. But as soon as he laces his fingers with mine, I become ravenous. Only not for food. He leads me through a normal door, and behind him I catch his scent. His smell, distinctly him, is a mixture of vanilla and the minerals of a mountain stream.

We arrive at a wide carpeted hallway filled with sentries and servants hustling to and fro. I hear every inch of fabric rustle against skin. I hear armor clink and steps thud on the carpet, thread by thread.

I grab my pounding head again. Aster pulls me off to a balcony breezeway where, thank Creator, there is hardly anyone else. He lets go of my hand as he says, "Don't look out, just look at the carpet for a moment."

A table and chairs appear by the wall in my peripheral vision. But the carpet. It shimmers.

"The carpet...has...starlight in it?"

“Very tiny bits, yes, good, you’re focusing. That’s good.”

Blast, my head hurts. I mumble back, “Had to walk in darkness through an entire district of cottages in the dead of night, but of course, fae carpet is lit from within.” He chuckles and grabs my hand again. His hand on mine. *ASTER! I NEED YOU NOW!* He dims all the lanterns for me, the entire balcony, as if he’s thrown shade over this whole side of the palace.

We sit at the table. Even sitting is stimulating my needs. I do not want to waste time eating. He waves open the plates, and a flaky meat pastry before me smells so lovely I find myself tearing up.

Talking of his grandmother and crying for meat pies.

What a faerie I am turning out to be.

Water first. Even the water is...wetter?

“It’s thrilling to watch you.” Aster seems mesmerized. I look up at him, my beautiful prince. I take a few bites of pure ecstasy and hear the start of a thunderstorm in the distance. I feel the thunder under my feet, as if the city itself is groaning.

I can still hear so much, some wings flapping, birds crying out. With the sounds and the hunger—both varieties— it is hard to find my thoughts.

“I imagine you’re overwhelmed.”

“Yes, the sensations...” I say through my food. I also note the pulsing and tingling everywhere. Is that magic? “Can I—do I have magic now? Powers?”

“Magic, maybe a tiny bit. You can try to snap with practice. Powers, no. At least not like I have—you won’t be able to bend light or sift or things like that.”

I listen and process for a moment, but after a couple bites hit my stomach, all other senses and needs lose out. All I can think about is kissing Aster, feeling him, becoming one with him right now. My prince. My soulmate.

“Can we go...elsewhere?” I say quietly. He knows what I mean.

He smirks knowingly. “Give yourself a minute. You’ll faint.” I quickly eat a few more bites. He just watches, both of us thinking of how we want to get to a room. Any room. I feel such affection for him, I am overwhelmed.

“You are somehow even more lovely,” he says. I smile and keep eating because he insists. I marvel at the warmth between us. Eternity with Aster. A long, magical future. Together. What will we see and do? I think of all the good we can do, the changes we can make together, and almost burst with joy.

“So...now, we’ll be married?” My voice comes out a squeak.

Shock crosses his face. “M-married?”

My brow twists. “Yes, married. Right?” Why isn’t he smiling?

“Jaylyn.” He takes my hand. “I...I can’t marry a made fae.”

What?

I must have misheard. I blink and focus my hearing. I search his eyes. What is he saying? He isn’t making sense.

“But our souls...when I woke, I felt you in my whole body.”

“I know, yes. But marriage—it’s not done. Royalty can’t —” He puts a hand on my knee.

“But our souls are tied up together in our chests. I can feel you. What—what are you saying?”

He reaches up and holds my face with his other hand. Tingles break out everywhere his skin meets mine. I have to shake my head to keep from launching my mouth to his. He raises his voice a bit. “To be soulmates isn’t to be married. Marriage is politics. I have to marry a pure-blooded fae lady. There cannot be a made queen nor a made heir. There could never—the people would riot. We are soulmates, yes, but I have to *marry* a High Fae lady of the stars. It’s law.”

“Your parents, all the kings and queens marry their—”

“No. That’s a farce. They say they are soulmates, but royalty doesn’t have the privilege. All royal marriages are arranged over decades of political courtship.”

“But you wanted me, you said—”

He winces. “I do, Jaylyn, I do! I’m so glad you’re mine.”

“Yours...but not your wife.”

He closes his eyes and sighs.

My voice raises. “So...your what, then...your concubine?” I should be filled with rage, but I’m so taken aback. And still overcome. My head is still pounding, and nothing makes sense.

And somehow my body can only think of one thing—and it isn’t Aster’s soul.

The thunder grows louder around us. I hear the rustle of more wings, the stomping of more footsteps. More tremors move in the floor and the walls. Tears feel different in my eyes as they roll down my cheeks. My ears start to ring with all the stimulation. “That’s what you mean. Your... consort.”

“No, Jaylyn, please listen to me. Royal marriages aren’t for love.” Love. He said love. “We have to strengthen our house, the kingdom, all the realms. It’s millennia of High Council tradition. I don’t have a choice.”

“Does your father have a soulmate as his...mistress then?”

“He never found his mate, but even if he had, it’s the law, Jaylyn.”

“But you’re the *prince!* Tell your father you want to change the bleeding laws, for star’s sake!”

He squeezes my hand. “Jaylyn, I assure you, whomever my wife will be, whomever else I mate with, I promise, it won’t *mean* anything to me.”

“Whomever else? Else, whom else?”

He shakes his head. “It won’t matter. Not at all. Try to understand. I can’t have just one female available to me, Jaylyn.” I can hear the lights flickering, feel the city trembling. This is some storm coming on. Which is odd. I feel something like sparks traveling through the air. Is it normal for thunder to shake a whole city? But quickly my thoughts come back to the beautiful creature before me as he speaks. “I’m to be king, and I must have an heir. Producing a fae child can take decades—it’s very difficult. So I must mate with more than one female.”

I slump back in the chair. “I don’t understand. Why torture me on that table at all, all this, why be soulmates at all if we can’t mate? Can’t have a family?”

“Well, this has never happened, a match like ours. But for non-royalty, your child would be almost indistinguishable from pure bloods. Fae strength, true blood, it wins out in the womb. A made-fae baby even has wings. They can be normal members of our society here. But, well, you’re different because *I* am different. We cannot have a queen with no wings, no powers. I can’t change this.”

“You can—you’re the prince! You’ll be king one day, Aster. You can!” He takes note of the rumbling too. He looks around, concerned. I raise my voice to get his attention. “Tell me you’ll talk to him, to them, please.”

More flickering.

I know he is about to run off and see to another crisis. His shades on the balcony give way to blinding sunlight. My eyes throb, but I don’t turn away from him. He is right there—my prince, and not mine, not really. He pulls me up to stand with him.

He puts his hands on my cheeks. “I’ll come to you tonight and we can talk about it. The other females won’t matter, none of it will mean anything, Jaylyn.”

Four sentries burst around the corner.

“Your Highness! Graglins—they’ve made it into the sky, into the palace!”

A tumble of swords and feathers is suddenly all around us. We are herded, surrounded by guards, through a portal

door to a courtyard. It is the front courtyard Aster showed me, near the steps of the Star Palace.

And it is up in flames.

And the sounds.

Servants are bleeding, screaming. There is red blood and black blood coating every stone surface. Sentries run in every direction, shooting lightning at the graglins. Black burn marks litter the stone all over. But the graglins rage on, even when hit by light.

The graglins are not just little pests, after all. They resemble small black human skeletons. The dark beasts are hairless, earless, with bulging, terrible eyes much too large, clouded over. The eyes have no irises, no pupils, just white milky clouds. Their oversized slit mouths hold thousands of teeth. They cover the courtyard like a blanket of short black threads.

And they are wearing armor? Yes, armor. My fae sight catches the small purple mark as it passes. The seal of the Kingdom of the Soul. Soul soldiers? Soul soldiers that are graglins. Attacking Raelus.

Their horrible screeching noises mix with the growls of the fae fighters and the cries of dying servants. My ears ache. The graglins kill with abandon, unlike human or faerie, with endless stabbing, slicing, and smashing. Bones crunch in my ears a million times over.

I hear the arrows flying at us before they arrive in a shower. Aster's hand leaves mine as his guards pull him close to shield him. Another shower of arrows flies from the other direction. I can sense the arrows are charged

with magic. Painful magic. Terror grips as I see a chorus of arrows bearing down upon me. I am surrounded by graglins and wounded, so there is nowhere to run. I can't escape them left or right. "Aster!" I look for him, and in that instant, he and his sentries are gone. Sifted away.

I look back up with a scream and close my eyes, waiting for the pain.

A wall of wing arches over me as a voice cries out from behind my back. I am in the air, being held. One of Aster's sentries. I slump in relief—Aster hasn't left me after all.

The guard cries out in pain again as he soars us around. I can feel magic all around me in the air. I close my eyes at the sensations. The guard holding me is hot and smells of honey and sweat. He keeps grunting in pain from a few spelled arrows I can somehow sense.

I open my eyes for a quick peek at the city as we climb. Raelus is almost all smoke and flames. The graglins swarm like ants on a browning apple core. It is horrifying. I can see sentries and normal fae citizens alike, fighting the pests with swords and lightning. Sparks web all over the city structure.

The sentry cries out again, and I feel the new charge of the arrows as they pierce him. His wings give out, and we drop. We fall and fall so fast. I screech again, realizing his legs and wings have gone limp. Is he dead? No. His arms still grip me. His hold grows so tight as we fall that I cry out in pain.

The rush of the fall is too much. My head feels as though it may fall out of my skull. The wind howls, the graglins scream, the sentry holding me moans. I wail and cry out to

join the cacophony. The physical rush sends an emotional wave through me. *ASTER, ASTER, ASTER. YOU ARE MINE, WHERE ARE YOU!*

I see netting come around us in a flash.

Rope burns at my skin, then there is a hard tug as we're caught mid-air.

Then, all over again, there's nothing but black.

PART TWO

CHAPTER 18

Iron. Blood. Sweat. Urine. Bile.

ASTER REALLEN! ASTER WHERE ARE YOU! ASTER!

My head is still stabbing at my skull, my ears ringing.

I hear chains, ruffling, rustling. Someone moans, something clanks. My wrists are heavy and bound. I make out some soft talking, hardly more than a whisper.

“They’re waking, Goody! They’re not dead. They looked oh so very dead. Oh, I’m so glad!”

“Good day. Good day.”

“Yes, Goody! Yes!”

What?

It takes all my concentration to lift my eyelids. My throbbing head is glad for the darkness. After a moment, I can make out the creature almost nose to nose with me. She is a small wisp of a thing, as tall standing as I am sitting.

She is a faerie, I’m sure, but she is so dirty and thin she no longer looks fae. I can make out in the darkness that her hair hangs in matted chunks. The rags she wears are more holes than tunic and her small wings are bound, with very few feathers left. And she is covered in filth.

Stars, the smell is awful.

The scene comes into view around me. She is shackled to the stone wall behind her, in what appears to be a small passageway. A soft light off to my left, just barely visible,

illuminates the passageway, built from stacked stones, damp and dirty. Though it's too dark to see them, I can hear bodies moving along the floor of the hall in both directions.

Not a hall. A long prison cell.

The net.

We were captured.

A dungeon. I am in a dungeon.

Aster, where are you? Aster, where are you? Aster, where are you? I feel his absence terribly. It's as if a boulder has been placed on my chest where my hands were crossed just minutes before.

"You're not dead. Though, you might wish you were. We've wished we were so many a time, haven't we, Goody?"

"Good day. Good day," a rough, soft voice answers her.

Something hot brushes my left arm. It takes nearly all my strength to turn my head. There is the sentry, bound and shackled next to me.

"A Star sentry, so very exciting. Thirty years ago, we had an under-lord thief, remember, Goody? He was dreadful. Oh, I hope this giant soldier isn't dreadful!"

It appears I've finally found a being whose mouth chatters more than mine.

"Helmet," the sentry croaks. I lift my arms, pulling them through tar. He can barely lift his at all. I push my fingers up under the back of his helmet, feeling the crust of dried blood on cold metal pull free as he moves his head. The helmet falls to the ground, to the tiny female's delight. She puts it on, and it overtakes her head, shoulders, and arms.

“Look, Goody! I’m a sentry! Oh, am I so very frightening?”

“Thank you,” the sentry says. My eyes have adjusted well to the light now, much better than human eyes ever could.

“Your head is bleeding,” I tell the soldier.

He turns to look at me. “It will heal.”

I knew that hard brow. And the cold voice.

“Kal?”

He winces in pain as he answers, “My lady.” He is bleeding everywhere.

“You saved me.”

He doesn’t reply, of course. Which helps me remember his blank stare and rigid form as I pleaded with him for freedom. I all but fell prostrate on the ground before him just hours ago.

And he did nothing.

He didn’t even look at me. He let me march forward to suffer through what felt like the breaking of every bone in my body, every nerve crushed. “You.” I am so filled with disgust I want to spit at him “You look terrible, wingbag.”

“He does, he really does. Goody and I were almost certain he was dead. Which would be quite awful but also quite a thrill since no one ever dies, do they Goody? But there was so much blood. It’s everywhere. So exciting. Wingbag, is that your name, my lord? Peculiar name, but I’ve heard stranger, I suppose.”

“Kal,” I tell her. I have to stop her chatting or my head will bust. “This horrible beast’s name is Kal, and I am Jaylyn.

Who are you?"

"I am Min. This is Goody."

"Good day!" I find the voice. An old male faerie sits across from Kal, beside Min. He must be a thousand years old or more to look like the priestess who just tortured me. He has no wings that I can see. His head hangs, and his shoulders hunch terribly. His hands are badly mangled, and I can make out some scars underneath the grime all over his skin. His face holds deep wisdom and kindness, with wrinkles around his eyes and mouth as if he's done nothing but smile his whole long life.

"Is it morning?" I ask Min.

"Oh, no, he's mad, my lady. Totally gone in the brain. He only says 'good day.' For decades it was only good evening. *Good evening! Good evening! Good evening!*" She bobbles her little head as she says it. "Quite aggravating at first, but after so long I'm used to it. Some while after we met, I just called him Goody. Good didn't feel like a name, and neither did Evening."

"Do you know where we are?" I ask hopefully. The swell of desire for some answers wakes my chest stir. *Aster. ASTER! ASTER!* My body aches all over, but more than that, inside, my entire being longs for my mate. I have to get back to him. Perhaps Kal can get me out of here somehow, after he heals.

"The Soul Dungeons of Neymu, my lady." Soul.

Yes, the purple crest I saw.

The Dungeons of the Soul King.

Panic washes into the gaping soulmate-shaped hole in my chest. We've been taken from the Star Kingdom...which was left in ruin. War? A fae war? Father is surely fighting. What is happening to the boys, to mother? What if Father is dead? No one knew to warn mother, or anyone in town. Heartache and worry join my panic.

Aster Raellen! Aster! My subconscious keeps asking me where he is. It is as if my soul is angry with my body for not being next to him. And Aster, somewhere, must be feeling this too. He will come for me. This pressure on me, in me, is unbearable.

He will sift himself across kingdoms and find a way. Surely. *Surely? Right?* I start to lose my breath, from worry and from the strange suffocating sensation happening in my whole body.

"Min." The feathered wall beside me finally speaks. "How long have we been here?"

"Time is a funny thing sir, here in the dark. I would guess a day? Maybe less but maybe more."

He nods slowly. "How many meals have been brought?"

"Ah, are meals still set to morning and night? I cannot say. Goody? Is it morning and night for our slop?"

"Good day."

"Yes, then. Well done, Goody! A bowl just before you arrived and then a while ago while you were sleeping," she reports. He barely nods.

I look up at the sentry, still shocked at all the words he's managed to string together. I throw my words at him like

knives. “And this is a magic dungeon, I’m sure? You can’t disappear us away?” He just sighs.

“No, no, miss, no sifting,” Min chimes in. “No magic at all in here except the healing, which is slowed. But we do heal, so we can be reinjured, of course.” She says it as a matter of fact. As if it is the natural way of things. So. Imprisonment *and* torture. She freezes her swaying in her chains as she talks. “I’ve almost forgotten it, magic. There was a span of about fifty years I couldn’t help myself snapping.” She sounds beyond melancholy. She has been here longer than fifty years.

I focus on the sentry. “Why didn’t you evaporate us away before? Are you not powerful enough to do that?”

Kal grimaces as he stretches out his limbs. “Sentries can’t sift freely in Raelus. We can’t access all our powers. The king keeps a tight leash.”

“Why didn’t we stay with the prince?”

His voice is scratchy and growing weaker. “He was already gone.”

Min snaps out of her memories. “Pray tell, where have you come from? Which prince, which king?” Kal doesn’t—can’t?—answer.

“Arian, of the Stars,” I tell her.

“Oh, with his kind blue eyes! And the Star City Raelus! I’ve never been, of course, but I’ve heard so many a wondrous story! Does it truly sparkle day and night? Is the palace so high clouds can’t reach—”

“Min.” Kal is commanding but quiet at the same time. It irritates. *He* irritates. She stops and looks up at him. “I need to think, and the lady needs to rest. Can you give us a few hours’ quiet?”

“Ah, yes, but of course,” she whispers before turning and sitting next to Goody. She is quiet for a moment.

Then she begins humming. I didn’t know the tune, but I don’t mind. The rhythm of her song soothes me. I am desperately hungry and even more tired, not just in my body but in my spirit.

For a moment, however, I am not wondering about all those questions. I’m not guessing about what will happen at the ceremony, or if I will live through it. I am no longer trying to decipher a prince’s feelings.

Aster Raellen. ASTER! I feel a sharp, tight tug every time I think of him. I will get back to him, I will, but not in the next few hours. So, I lean into the rhythm of Min’s song. I lay my head back on the wall and try to sleep.

But sleep is hard to find in Zaynr’s dungeon.

CHAPTER 19

I wake with a start after drifting off for only a few moments. My soul screams *ASTER*, but what arouses me is the smell. Something other than filth. Not a good scent, but almost sweet. Between my legs lies a full bowl of watered-down porridge.

“Dinner time, my lady!” Min says with glee. In her rags and chains, she is possibly the happiest person I’ve ever encountered. Kal’s eyes are closed, but he is breathing. He still looks awful and probably feverish. I wonder how I look. I glance down to observe my beautiful dress that is now covered in filth. My hair has fallen out of Fawn’s styling and my necklace is gone, likely stolen by one of the Soul guards who captured and imprisoned us.

Prison. I am in prison. And in pain, which I thought might not happen to the fae. So they can be hurt. A gash on my arm must’ve come from a spelled arrow that just missed me. Or from the harsh rope netting. Plus, there is the lingering ache from the ceremony. But nothing is as bad as my hunger. Fawn warned me to eat. Sweet, tired Fawn...I wonder if she is alive.

I decide to start Min off talking while I gobble the porridge. “How long have you been in here, Min?”

“Hmmm, hard to say, hard to say. More than a century, but less than two, wouldn’t you say, Goody?” He gives her a nod.

I proceed gently. “And you were caught committing a crime?”

“Not caught. I was discovered, my lady.”

“Discovered?” I say with my mouth full. The porridge is disgusting, but I can’t fill fast enough.

“A half-breed. Soul and Flesh,” she explains softly as she pulls a thread hanging from her rags. It appears to be a calming habit. “You know, of course, it is forbidden. No crossbreeding, no, no. When I was found out, they threw me down here.”

Crossbreeding.

It takes me a moment to realize with shock and embarrassment—and irritation—that I know nothing of my rulers. I know little of my whole world. Almost nothing at all.

She carries on. “I was fortunate enough to be shackled next to Goody, who was here before me. We’ve had thieves and murderers come and go for short stays. But Goody makes for good company.”

“And his crime?”

“Well, of course there’s much I don’t know, because he’s only ever said ‘good evening’ and ‘good day,’ my lady.”

“Jaylyn, please. I’m not a lady.” Or am I? Is a fae prince’s mate considered a lady? I cut in with another question before she begins trailing off. “Why do they leave you down here, Min? How much longer do you have?”

“Oh, there is no end to my sentence, no. With good behavior on my side and need for workers on the side of Neymu, I could become a prison maid for the kingdom, possibly. Wouldn’t that be glorious? I could clean latrines

up above somewhere, in the air. I dream of it, day and night.” Her face does light up. At the thought of cleaning waste. She turns to sit, and I notice her wings again.

“Have you been, injured and...reinjured?”

She nods gravely. “To give away the identity and location of my parents. They were as guilty of a crime in mating as I am in existing. But I never told, and I think the lords and sentries came upon bigger matters some decades later. Then, mercifully, I was forgotten.”

“Good day.”

“Yes, Goody. Thank Creator. We are so happy to have been forgotten. Very lucky indeed. I wished for them to kill me for a time, of course, yes I did. But there is hope of leaving the darkness now, so my mind stays set on that. Doesn't it, Goody? Yes.”

I am about to cry just looking at the two of them.

If fae emotions are deeper or more frequent than human ones...I am in for a rough immortal existence.

I note my need for a waste pail and see one within reach. What fresh horror, to relieve myself two feet from the awful sentry and my new little friend. I ask her about the thieves and murderers as I grab it. I plead with my face and motion with my hand for her to please keep talking while I do what I can't put off any longer.

Talk she does.

She tells all about her capture and her horrifying time in prison. I ask questions here or there, trying to comprehend living in a hole of muck for a hundred years. Then it is Min's

turn for questions. I tell her every treacherous part of my tale, from Stokker's appearance to falling out of the sky and opening my eyes in a dungeon.

"Soulmates with a prince! A human fated to a prince—well, my mind cannot even comprehend it! And he took you flying. What I would give to fly again! Oh, what a marvelous tale!"

She seems to focus on the handsome prince. Her mind forgets the abduction, the terror of not knowing what would happen to me at any second, and the bit at the end about excruciating pain. She doesn't mention marriage, and I don't either. My heart hurts a little when I relive that conversation. *AsterAsterAster*. His absence is a constant call to me from far away.

"Min." Kal startles us both with his deep voice. "Have you heard any rumors of war?"

"No, my lord."

He grunts. "Hm."

"That's it?" I huff. "*Hm?* That's all you have to say?"

"With you two, if I'd more words to say, I wouldn't be able to fit them in, would I?"

Wait, was that...a joke?

The statue teased us. He doesn't smile or open his eyes to see, but Min nods and laughs at herself and the teasing.

"Good day!" Goody is also tickled.

I don't let myself even smile. I actually grow angrier, that he would attempt to be light and friendly after all he's done. Or not done.

“You saved me, but you also held me prisoner. You stood by as they tortured me on that table.” My eyes burn as I remember it all. “You’re just like the human sentries back home, high on an acorn’s-worth of power but even worse—you’re fae. An overlord content to build up humans and then squash them. I will never, *never* forgive you.”

“I know,” he replies. There is no emotion in his voice, just the statement of truth. It enrages me all the more, so I turn my back to him. I can sense the tension, and I close my eyes, hoping Min will leave me be. With an awkward cough, she does.

After I wake from a short rest, Min restarts as if I didn’t just spit vitriol at my savior. She asks again and again about Aster’s eyes, his hair, his boots, his height.

ASTER.

The strain inside me is constant. I felt connected to him before, but now, at the realization that he is my fated mate, the attachment is amplified a hundred-fold. I keenly feel his absence, as if we were just in an embrace and he vanished. He is mine and I am his.

My soul also feels the desire. My mind wanders to all his touches, all the moments we shared before the ceremony... I’ve never felt such feelings before. Lust. Ease. Joy. Angst.

Love. It has to be—and it all makes more sense now. All the dreaming and talking and singing of soulmates.

But I am not sure love is enough to cover all that staying with Aster will mean. I am to be one of many in his bed. To produce him an heir, which is apparently a difficult, decades-long endeavor. For all of us. Myself and whoever

else will be beside me, in the shadows on the outskirts of his life, while his pure-blood Star Kingdom High Fae wife shines beside him.

He didn't say he would try to change the laws. Maybe it was unfair of me to ask him to do so. If we can't marry and I never become queen, there is probably scarce hope of my ability to make changes for humans below.

Now that I have felt his soul mix with mine, it doesn't feel like I have a choice. Can I bear to be without him?

No, I cannot bear it. This is love, and I am his. And I don't think I can bear sharing him either.

I just need to get to him and convince him, my soulmate. My Aster.

I turn back to asking the questions. And so it goes, round and round for a few days, by my count. Kal rests and grunts occasionally. He only opens his eyes to eat. He seems to be healing based on how he sits up and moves. I am also fairly sure he is pretending to feel worse than he does so he can avoid speaking to us.

Min is so happy to talk to me that she never bothers him. And she does thrill me with her knowledge. At last, I can rattle off all my questions to someone free to answer me, and she knows most answers.

Human Placement started three hundred or so years ago, when fae houses started to weaken without any offspring. Fae find their mates as humans do, by going to court within their own kingdom to meet their fated mate or hoping to seal a bond with their lover. Since the Great War, fae have

not been allowed to crossbreed between kingdoms, to maintain balance among power and trade.

With the varying fae powers, greedy kings would try it again—to sire the most powerful combinations of heirs and kill off those with lesser powers. Rulers could amass armies of such varying power and strength that they could conquer the whole planet. The lesser beings—elves, hobbits, humans—would be exterminated. So, it was forbidden. The High Council put laws in place to keep the fae balance—and the other races—intact.

But after the Great War, it became even harder for fae to procreate. The idea of creating more fae by magic started to entertain the High Council. They had a priestess carve the first fate table from a large mountainside temple made of holy stone. They took a section of wall and laid it flat and started trying different prayers and ceremonies, to see if other beings could be transformed using the stone's power. More fae would bring in more magic, new magic. But elves and hobbits have their own connection to magic—or resistance to the fae—that made them incompatible. The ceremony didn't work on them, and the tests often resulted in the loss of life. Relations between fae and the other species started to deteriorate.

The fae were left to try the ceremony, a mixture of prayer and power and holy stone, on humans. It did work, most of the time. Each of the other six kings had their own holy tables carved from mountain reserves across the planet. A separate table for each kingdom kept powers evenly distributed and equivalent.

Min explained that breeding with the new human faeries is acceptable because they can bear babies but, unlike crossbreeding, the humans turned into faeries don't gain new powers. Their fae offspring have magic and power, though slightly less than purebloods. Still, the race began to recover, and balance has been restored. It became law that elves and hobbits couldn't craft their own fate tables because they didn't have enough magical power to perform the ceremonies.

Part of the ceremony, which I couldn't hear because of the internal screaming, offers prayers for the human's soul and happiness. Creator blesses the table by adding divine magic to the already precious stone. When the human on the table opens their eyes, they know their mate. Either by name or upon seeing them for the first time.

Min confirms what little Aster told me before we were separated. The magic of the table is not to torture but to benefit to all. The priestesses who pray over the tables are said to be merciful and just. Soulmates are united. Humans receive immortality, and the fae grow in strength.

Exceptional humans, that is. Only the outliers are brought into the skies to add their beauty and skills into the Kingdom. Because only the strongest humans, either physically or mentally, have a good chance at surviving the power of the ritual.

The more humans there are, the greater the chances they will produce, bringing in great minds and strong bodies to supplement fae numbers. Thus, humans are given stipends for each child they have. Those stipends increase for each child that is Placed.

Now the breeding centers make sense in the worst of ways. And it sounds as though it is about keeping humans down, yes, but also very much about keeping the fae in the clouds.

My stomach sours, but I keep asking. “And when did the breeding centers start?”

“The what?” Min is finally stumped.

“Human breeding centers.”

“I surely don’t know anything about that, no I don’t.”

“Hm. Well. They’re horrible.” I don’t want to get into the details and rain on the sunshine that is Min. I’m also surprised I know something she doesn’t. I cut off our conversation because if knowledge is power, I am not allowed to have any. If I ever get out of this pit, I could be struck down just for my awareness of the centers.

She is happy to flip our conversation back to the prince. Over and over. *Yes, Min, he is handsome. Yes, he is kind. Yes, he is strong.* Speaking of him makes the hammering need in my chest pound harder. *Yes, I felt my soul meld with his. No, I haven’t any idea where he is, but yes, he will come save me.* She particularly loves the story of flying with him. She also implies all manner of things about our eventual children, which I ignore completely.

I go around and around with her, even though speaking of him makes the ache worse. After a turn about him, I flop the conversation back to the fae world. I try to put together all the pieces. Min doesn’t mind.

“Humans become fae. As I am now. But no wings and no magic?”

“No *powers*. Magic is all around us, Miss Jaylyn. Well, it *was* around us. It *is* when you’re not down here in the depths. And now you can access it. Or you could. If we were above and unbound. You can’t access as much as an elf or a true faerie. But some.”

“But not sifting.”

“Oh, no, very unlikely. That takes more magic than you can feel, I’d think, don’t you think, Goody?” He agrees. Or at least, Min says he agrees.

“Magic but no powers...What are your powers, Min?”

She chuckles.

“I am not mighty, Miss Jaylyn, just a lowly half-breed. But my Flesh father gave me his powers of healing, changing objects, sewing objects together. My Soul mother’s strength is much weaker and gives me just a hint of mind power.”

“Mind power? Reading my thoughts?”

“No, but stars, that would be so interesting. Wouldn’t it? Imagine if I could peek into Goody’s mind right now and finally find what happened to him. Oh, to know why he only says two words, what those words mean! Could they mean —”

“Min, what *can* you do?” I have to get her back on track often. Her habits make sense, though, after talking to only herself and a mad faerie for a hundred years. I hate the thought of it, how this beautiful little spark of sunshine has been locked in darkness. Just for existing.

“I used to be able to make you see things that aren’t there. I could put a frog in your mind here in between us, jumping

and squeaking.”

“Wings above.” I shudder—from awe but also from the chill. It was spring back home, but Neymu has a wetter climate. Plus, we are seemingly very deep underground. My teeth chatter but I keep my feelings to myself. I have plenty more layers than Min and Goody, who huddle next to each other to sleep in shared warmth. It may be cold, but I am alive. I need to stay strong for Aster.

ASTER! My name must be pulling at his soul as well. The tug must be driving him to madness too. He will come for me.



I wake up pleading Aster’s name, out loud. I am warm, I realize, because Kal’s side is almost on top of me from shoulder to toe. He’s a furnace, which is not totally unwelcome, but I don’t like the idea of touching my tormentor. Also, my limbs are going numb from the weight of him. I scoot away as the tray of bowls comes through a slit in the wall.

“Look, look! Aren’t I pretty as a flower?” I can make out that Kal has given her his shirt, which is bloody and reeking. Yet it is cleaner and heavier than what she had. It dwarfs her, of course. She is a little head sticking out from the top of a tent. It is almost enough to make me laugh. Kal sits up and stretches but, as always, says nothing. For days. Thank stars for Min or I would’ve gone truly insane by now.

When we've finished eating, Min shares about the birds and beasts and flowers of Neymu. Cities are still in the sky but much of the kingdom is up against the sea. She tells me of beaches and trees and hills that sounded nothing like home. The world is so much bigger than I was made to believe.

"Min."

She stops shifting on her feet at once, and our conversations halts. It is truly enraging how with one syllable Kal seemingly freezes time and space.

He looks from her to down at me, his eyes wide, almost wild.

"I have an idea."

CHAPTER 20

“It’s madness, sir, madness.” Min squawks. “Miss, don’t do it! You can’t!”

“Kal, please. Aster will come for me. We don’t need to do this.” I try to reason with him.

He shakes his head to dismiss me. “He can’t just waltz into Soul lands, especially not while at war.”

“Shouldn’t we wait to see? Maybe it is just taking him a few days to search. He can’t know exactly where I am.”

Kal grunts. “A Soul general will remember us first. You do not want to endure that.”

I resign a little bit. “But this is insane.”

“It’s our best chance.”

“It’s torture, Jaylyn, torture! You can’t!” Min does not like Kal’s idea, which starts with me pulling a large feather from the underside of his good wing.

“Is it? Torture?” I ask him. Min is still talking but I have already grown used to tuning her out.

“Like ripping off your thumbnail.” He tilts his face, still covered in dried blood, in consideration. “Maybe a bit worse.”

“It’s worse than that!” Min is beside herself. I feel more pity for her than for Kal.

“I will be fine. Tell her, Goody.” Goody’s two words are quiet but affirmative. Min starts weeping. Kal is firm with

her, though not harsh. “Min. Hush or a guard will hear you.” She obediently curls into a quiet ball of sniffs.

He turns to me. “You’ll have to reach up under, where my wings meet my back at the bottom, single out a thick feather, and pull.” His plan does make sense, even if it’s a mad long shot. However, I don’t appreciate my role in it. Perhaps I should be eager to pay his torture back in kind, but I’ve never been good with blood or pain.

“Goody can’t do it?” I say, starting to sound almost as squeaky as Min.

“Neither of them have your strength. You’ll have to pull hard...Min? Min, we need you.” She looks up at him. “Get in front to brace, so she can pull harder.” Kal scoots to put his back square in front of me with his legs out straight. “Put your legs on either side of me. Min will push against your feet.”

I am not sure which is more awkward, straddling him from behind at present or having used the waste bin to relieve myself earlier. Lucky me, to get to ponder such things right now.

“Find the base of my wings,” Kal instructs, easing the absurdity. I move a bit off to the side to get around his wings. I try to put my hands up under his wing to feel for feathers, but the chain doesn’t have enough slack.

“You’ll have to scoot back into me,” I tell him. He does, planting a wing to my face. I harrumph and he sighs, waiting. This feels somehow like the most intimate I’ve ever been with a fae male, even though that’s not the case. He seems to touch me everywhere. Stars, he dwarfs me.

I reach up under his battered wing. “Ok, I’ve got a feather.” Min winces, and Goody looks away. I swallow, feeling as if I’m about to injure all three of them. Still, I want freedom, which lies on the other side of this challenge. I grasp my fingers around the thick, silky feather and tug. Kal winces, which causes my stomach to flip. The feather doesn’t budge.

“I—I’m not sure I can do this.” I had dreams of experiencing a good many things in this life, none of which included ripping off someone’s thumbnail. My hands start sweating with nerves.

He leans forward to turn back and look me in the face. “Jaylyn. You do this, and we start back to your prince. Now, pull!” He leans forward again. So he *does* remember my name. And at the thought of Aster, my soul is again yanked from me. *For Aster.* I find the will to secure my grip on the feather. I flex my feet at Min, who holds as strong as her tiny arms can.

I yank hard once and feel the feather come away, but not totally. Kal grimaces, and Min cries out, causing me to cry out. Goody mutters in disgust.

“Again!” Kal grits so loudly it pushes me to get the task over with. I pull again, harder.

The feather comes away. There is almost immediately blood all over my hands, all over his back. All three of the fae before me make an unintelligible noise.

Kal slumps.

He...he’s fainted? The mountain has fainted!

So, it was not like ripping off a nail.

I hand Min the bloodied, shaking feather. She takes it with both palms outstretched up and flat, as if it is a prized, double-edged sword.

“Kal?!” I move back his wings and try to brace him, keep him from falling back into the wall without me there, but he is too heavy. He’s fallen in my direction, giving me the slack to get on my knees in front of him. This is so much blood for one feather. Aren’t fae supposed to be invincible? *Some mighty beast!*

Maybe he wasn’t well enough for this. Min said he can’t heal himself down here. He did look pale and pained before we started. Did I just kill my only hope for getting out of here?

I shake him. “Kal!” Nothing. I start to panic. I grip his face in my hands. “Ugh, you stupid silent oaf, wake up!”

His eyelids twitch, and he puts his hands on my arms. “I’m fine,” he croaks. “Water.”

I climb off and grab the cup up against the wall. All four of us held back some of our water earlier knowing he’d need it.

“Well done,” he says to all of us without opening his eyes. They are squeezed shut under a twisted brow. I truly hope this beast doesn’t die.

I don’t ask him any questions. Even Min is quiet. For now, we must simply sit and wait.



Kal keeps the feather tucked under his thigh as he rests. His healing is so slow that he's fainted twice more. Min says little because all she wants to talk about is the feather and our plan. It is too risky that a guard may pass by the gate, just a few paces away, and hear her. We also don't want any fellow prisoners to hear, though none of them are very close. We whisper only when the cells fill with sounds of talking, singing, fighting and, most often, wailing.

As we wait for Kal to come to, I think of Aster. Sometimes with hope, sometimes with anger or sorrow. But almost constantly. I remember his eyes, his smile, his arms around me. Every memory causes that ache in my spirit. *I just need to get back to him*, I keep telling myself. We need to talk things out. I will make him see reason. I will convince him to talk to his father about the marriage law.

But...what then? The whole kingdom is weakened by a wingless made queen and her half-made heirs? Fae aren't even allowed to crossbreed, as Min has told me. Made children are fine for some High Fae, but for the crown? How could they ever let a half-made pollute the royal bloodline? The whole system of our world falters, all for me? For us?

I want our whole world to change, truly I do. But I know my family has the best of lots. Changing things could cause war, famine, make their lives below harder. Will my love for Aster ruin Loya and all its seven kingdoms?

No.

Stars! Mother was right about my crazed imagination.

I am just a human girl, Placed like so many before me. I will not be the world's end. We can change a law. Perhaps it

is our destiny. After all, our match is the first time a human and a prince have been revealed as soulmates in three centuries. That must mean something. It must. I just need to get back to him and feel his arms and hear his voice. And I need the nagging, physical ache in my chest to go away before I am crushed under the weight of it.

After a day and night, while the dungeon is noisy, Kal sits up straight and looks at me. Apparently, it is time for the next part of his idiotic plan.

“Let’s try it.” He shifts to face me fully, and I offer him my hands.

“Creator, stars, and skies, I hope this works.” Min whispers.

Kal believes the quill of his feather is strong enough to pick the lock on my shackles. He takes the feather in his hand and gets to work on the locks. He needs all the chain’s slack, so again we are as close as we can be to one another. He is warm and breathing on me and not looking me in the eye. I refuse to look at him as well. Still, my heart races in hope of escape. This has to work.

“Well? Can you get it?” I finally ask, after an eternity of his heat surrounding me. The ache for Aster in my chest wants to know how long this terrifying plan will take.

“Not if you don’t hold still,” he snaps.

“My apologies. Not all of us are made of rock,” I spit back.

He looks from my wrists to my eyes with an anger in his glare. Blast, if I am not a bit scared of him. He looks back to our hands again. Then my thoughts begin to flow, and I

grow very scared. He saved me, and he is gentle with Min. He seems trustworthy. But what do I really know of him?

What if he frees me, I free him in turn, and he leaves me behind? Now that he isn't held by the palace magic, he can sift away to safety. He has no reason to stay with a powerless baby fae. A newly made female, ignorant of seemingly every known thing about the world around her. One who royally told him off with a vow to never forgive...

Not a great companion.

If he leaves, I am sunk. We are not even in my kingdom anymore, and within my kingdom, I have only ever been in my own town. How can I go anywhere or do anything on my own? If I tell a passing guard who and what I am, will I be captured all over again? Ransomed? Tortured? Kal stops and takes a deep breath and glares at me again. It doesn't help my building terror. My heart is thundering and my chest heaves.

"Calm yourself." He sighs. "We get out, go to Connestell, you return to the prince, I collect my reward."

I nod slowly.

Reward.

Now there is something simple. Something I can understand. So. I am of value to him. It doesn't make him my friend, but it means I can trust him, for now.

After what feels like an entire day, the lock clicks. He actually did it. Excitement fills our little space. The shackles fall and I rub my wrists with a sigh. My eyes release a few tears of relief. Min jumps up and down with her hands over

her mouth. “Good day! Good day!” Goody says before Kal just hushes us, serious.

My turn.

“It should be easier since I’ve shaped the quill. Be patient, feel it click.” My hands are sweaty and shaky. Kal grabs me by the wrists, gently. His touch, engulfing my wrists in his huge palms, is firm, serious, just like he is. “Breathe. There’s plenty of time.” He releases me so I can press the quill into the hole of the iron as he watches. I swallow. “Slowly. Feel for the fit.”

There is no fit. I feel nothing. But Kal carries on. “Turn it barely, until you feel it settle a bit.” I twist the quill. “Slowly! You’ll strip the shape!” he whisper-yells at me.

I am starting to miss the silent version him.

His eyes are wide with impatience. Perhaps he has a mean streak and will torture me the whole way home. I am cursed no matter what happens with this brute. He’s an angry soldier, just like all the sentries I’ve ever known. But huge and fae. I shrink away from him.

“Sorry,” he says, much softer, breathing deeply. “If we lose its shape, we’ll have to pull another feather...take your time.”

Another feather! *Blast.*

I suppose he has a right to be testy. Neither of us wants to go through that madness again. I slow. I turn the feather so carefully that I am sure Kal has fresh irritation at me now for going *too slowly*. But he says nothing, just breathes and listens with his eyes closed.

Then, at last, I do feel a shift. “There?” I whisper. *Stars, let this be over!*

“There. Push in.” He nods. I push the feather-key into the lock, and it settles into a new position. “Good! Now twist, with more force.” I do as he says, and with a loud snap, his wrists are unbound. He puts his free hands on my shoulders for a split second. “Well done.”

I feel an odd, small thrill at those words. In repose to the emotion, my body searches for my missing mate. I put a hand to my chest. Kal massages his wrists to more jumping and silent cheering from our two minuscule friends. After a breath we settle back down into our positions to avoid suspicion. I am relieved and happy but still very afraid.

Especially when I consider the next part of the sentry’s mad escape plan.

CHAPTER 21

Though it's the middle of the night and the whole dungeon sleeps, I am buzzing with energy. This is a massively terrible idea. Truly mad. Kal is the only calm to be found as he whispers instructions.

"It's just like the shackle. Turn to feel it, push, push, and twist."

"But you don't know if that lock is the same!" I cry back at him. "And between me and that lock, there are four male faeries!"

We *hope* it is only four. It is hard to make out the exact number in the dim light. We know that down from our stretch of the long vertical cell lies a gate. The light gives it away. Between us and that gate is another set of prisoners. Kal figures four, but we can only see vague silhouettes, so we can't be positive.

"You can do this. Your feet are quick and sure," Kal says, as if saying it makes it so.

"What? How do you know I'm light on my feet?"

"I've seen you dance." Oh, right. He was there.

"If anyone can do this without waking them, it's you." He repeats what we've gone through at least ten times. "Go slowly—don't create a stir. Listen for breathing to make sure no one wakes. Listen at the gate to make sure there's no sentry. Then pick the lock."

Then a whole fresh set of torture begins.

“Don’t leave the cell until you’re sure the hall is clear. Keep the quill and pull the gate so it looks closed. Then just scout. What is to the left, what is to the right. How many steps to the next hallway. Where are the guards, how many, what weapons. Go as far as you can without being seen, while positive you can backtrack your steps.” He makes me repeat it all back to him.

This is insanity, but Min agrees, based on her recollection of all their past cell mates: our time without interrogation—true torture—is running out.

I turn to go, and Kal grabs my hand with a jerk. He peers down at me with such intensity, I shrink. He is calming and unnerving at the same time. I have no idea what he will say. Maybe that our very lives depend on my feet, my balance. I can barely even see. “Jaylyn...slowly.”

I nod and take a breath.

I turn from them and move a couple paces. My feet make no noise, thank Creator. Two steps more, and I am upon the men. The light from the gate helps me see much better than I’d hoped. I listen to the breathing for what feels like a very long while.

Listening to Goody has taught me that a person can sound all but dead in their shackles yet be fully awake. I force myself to wait. Finally, I’m convinced it is as still as it will get. I take one large step over a set of legs, and freeze. No change around me. Another leap over another set of legs, and I hold my breath. Another big step out from all the legs, and then I am past them, almost to the gate.

I cling to the wall and listen. I listen for fabric, breathing, a sword, anything. All I hear is the glow of the lantern. I

start with the quill. Blast, I am sweating and shaking miserably. I breathe deep and remember everything Kal said. I listen back to his instructions over and over.

Twist until it fits. Breathe and twist slowly.

The quill nudges in just a hair.

Breathe. Breathe again. Push.

Yes! It pushes in.

Time to push and twist.

What if the iron gate makes noise? I don't push or twist too hard, terrified I'll hear a squeak or a click. It works, silently, and I exhale.

Kal is brilliant. Insane, insufferable, but brilliant.

With the wave of relief comes a pang for Aster. It is as if all my emotions are for him, with him, in him. But he isn't here, and my being feels his absence. Then I shake my head free of it. This is not the time to get distracted.

I open the gate as if in a vat of molasses. I only open it a sliver, just large enough for my body to get through. It makes a slight screech. I freeze and hold my breath.

Ages pass, my body stuck in the open gate. No one stirs, nothing changes. *Thank you, Creator above!* I vow I will start going to temple again.

Our cell gate is in a corner of a passageway. To my immediate left is wall and ahead the passage stretches straight. It ends quickly with a turn to the left. To my right the passage continues, but there is another cell gate. Prisoners within that cell might see me pass, so I choose straight ahead. Five leaping steps forward. At the end I

cling to the wall. I listen. After a few breaths of silence, I peek around the corner.

A guard!

Blast! I pull my head back and smash myself into the wall behind me. He seems to be sleeping. Terror fastens me to the wall at my back. I stay frozen and barely breathe. I think of Kal's steady voice again. *How many guards, what weapons.*

Ever so slowly, I peek around the corner again. The lone sentry is sitting on a stool and has one sword. I see no dagger, knife, or shield. I see no signs of light or exit. And I have not gotten very far, not far at all.

I turn back in the direction of our cell, so slowly I think I might die from nerves. Without locking the gate, I make it back through the legs to Kal, as fast as I can go. Which is dreadfully slow because I pause again and again to make sure no one stirs.

Kal is sitting with his head in his hands and stands when I get close. The relief in my three companions is almost palpable. The older two hold their hands over their mouths. Kal's relief dissipates as understanding washes over his face.

"You didn't make it very far."

"No. Just ahead was the only way to go, and after a left turn I saw one sentry. He was on a stool. He was sleeping. Had a sword, no dagger, no shield," I say, hearing the shaking in my voice. My whole body is shuddering violently from the adrenaline.

Kal grabs my shoulders and looks me in the eye. “You did it. Sit, rest a minute.”

Again, I appreciate his praise. The tension of all of this is getting to me, clearly. I sit and close my eyes. The next part of the plan is hazy. Kal will follow my directions out of the cell, and then in the corridors, he’ll fight us through to the outside. But we have no way of knowing which way leads out. There could be a hundred turns and a hundred guards between us and a doorway that leads to the surface.

Kal crouches down. “Tell me of their feet.” He gestures towards the gate.

“It was simple. One or two have their knees bent. Only a few legs block the path. Three steps. The light is a little better there.” He stands silently for a moment.

“Kal?” I whisper. The gate is unlocked, and a guard could come by at any moment. We have reached the part of his plan where we don’t have time to dally.

He walks a few steps towards the gate without me, and on instinct I scramble up to follow him. I am scared. And angry that he would just get up and go. But he turns back and grabs me close and firm with both arms.

He puts his mouth to my ear and whispers softly, “Trust me. Please. You have to trust me. Stay back.” I freeze in place as he lets me go and turns away. I don’t even twitch a finger. I hear a soft thud. I catch sight of his silhouette and realize what he is doing. Another thud. Another. The thuds seem much too loud.

“What the—” the last prisoner cries out before there is another thud. Kal has simply knocked them all

unconscious. It was a risk and now a noise has been made.

Blast!

He rushes to me and grabs my hand to pull us down back into our places. No one moves or breathes or blinks or thinks. We just freeze, my hand gripping Kal's as hard as I can. After a few painstaking minutes, Kal lets go and gets to his knees. Knocking the men out wasn't part of the plan, but I am not about to question him, as he just tossed around their skulls like it was nothing.

Now the two of us are supposed to slip out as quietly as we can. But Kal is just waiting there, thinking. After days of nothing but sitting, this is all happening too quickly. I fill with dread at the realization that we're leaving them.

We're deserting Min and Goody here. Maybe Kal is dreading that too. We talked it through and all of us agreed—though I consented last and under protest—for two of us to attempt escape is insanity, four is suicide. Min already said her goodbyes earlier and claimed she “can't wait to be rid of us.”

Kal gets alarmingly close to me again to whisper in my ear. I am caught off guard by the heat of him, and his faint honey smell. I'm also annoyed that I notice his scent at all.

“The feather.” He stretches out his hand. I hand it to him. The gate is still unlocked, but I don't ask what he is doing, I just watch.

He turns from me and stares at Min. He puts his finger to his lips and raises her hand to her mouth. He raises Goody's hand to cover his mouth too. His moves are slow, as if approaching a bucking bull.

Stars, he is going to kill them!

He is going stab them through the neck with the quill. That has to be it. And then I will be next. I put both of my hands over my mouth to cover a whimper.

No. He won't kill me. Will he? Is he being merciful? He has decided to end their suffering, and it is merciful. It is the merciful thing. I whimper again.

Kal turns and glares at me—I'm too noisy. I am panting and about to weep, so I close my eyes and turn away. The tears begin to flow as I brace myself against the wall. I won't see it, but I'll hear a body thump to the floor. I anticipate the sound. But I just hear a soft clink sound. I whip around in time to see that Min is free.

Kal freed her.

And she is furious.

Her hands, no longer shackled, are motioning wildly as she shakes her head no. This was explicitly *not* part of the plan. A moment later, Goody is free too.

I can't fight the impulse to grab Min and pull her into me for a hug. She embraces me, but I barely feel her frail arms at all. Overcoming my relief and shock, I wonder what Kal will do now. They are too weak and frail to run with us. He must have had a secondary plan for them. I look up and wait for him to speak.

But when I glance at him, in one arm he holds Goody like he is a sack of flour. He says nothing as he gathers Min up in his other arm. My mouth hangs open.

He freed them and now plans to carry them? He is still wounded, as the grimace on his features reveals. He motions with his head for me to lead us out. I blink back at him. He raises his eyebrows up to the ceiling and juts his chin out again.

Time is against us now. I will have to swallow down my shock.

I make haste. We have no trouble passing the prisoners, still unconscious. I look to make sure our corner is clear, again listening for any hint of a stir. All is quiet, so we step out into the corridor. Kal steps around me to take the lead.

When he gets to the corner, he sets down Goody and Min. He pushes all three of us into the wall with his right arm as he peers left around the corner. He turns and just nods at us. We understand. He wants us to stay back. No argument here. The three of us hold our breath as he disappears around the corner.

I brace for a thud, a clang, yelling. But there is only a small snapping sound. Then Kal is back, sword in hand, its blade bloody. We are all pulled taut as a lute string, but we say nothing. He picks up our companions again, like they are little more than air, and leads us to another corner.

It is the same—sink into the wall, watch Kal leave, listen as he takes out the guard, await his return. And again. And again.

We don't know if we're headed in the right direction. Any moment could be our last if a guard cries out or if Kal stumbles. We stay silent and terrified. All the adrenaline has my chest cavity begging for Aster with each gasp of air. I start crying at some point. Goody has tears streaming

down his face as well. Somewhere along the way, Min wets herself. Kal says nothing, just continues to pick them up and lead us on.

Another corner. He comes back. Another corner.

But he doesn't come right back.

There is a clang and then suddenly, "Run, Jaylyn. Run!"

Min runs, but Goody simply can't. I pick him up. Even with my new fae strength, the old male is *not* a sack of flour for me. I see we've made it to an opening, an entrance. The dark night waits for us outside. Kal is at the end of the corridor in the night air with two guards down on either side of him.

It is brutal to run with Goody in my arms. Everything aches, and I feel like I am much too slow. Kal's arms are wide, waiting. "Come, out past the threshold! Hurry!" He braces himself as all three of us crash into him. He wraps his wings around us all.

In a flash, I feel a tug of power around us. My vision starts to blur, but not before I see a sentry sift into view. He lunges at us and stabs straight through Kal's wing and shoulder.

Kal screams as if being ripped apart, but the sound is distorted.

My eyes shut as my body is pulled, pushed, back and forth, up and down. Kal holds us so tightly I know each of us will bruise. I see flashes of places and hear sounds and smell scents, blurred and shifting and changing. My chest searches for Aster in the confusion. *Aster, Aster, Aster.*

Sifting. Kal has sifted all three of us.

Kal screams a horrific cry of pain through the whole motion. He still holds the three of us in his arms through the whirling confusion.

The next moment, we crash down hard onto solid ground.

The impact concusses us all into darkness.

CHAPTER 22

Leaves. Dirt. Salt. Blood.

ASTER RAELLEN!

Where is Aster? Where am I? I have to get to him...

Leaves are rustling. Soft voices near me.

“Goody! Goody!”

My mind works.

Min. Min made it.

“Goody?”

“Grd drm,” Goody responds. Okay. He is all right too. I exhale a sob of relief.

“Jaylyn? Jaylyn.”

“I’m here, Min, I’m fine,” I say as I open my eyes. I can barely make out trees. A canopy of strange trees I’ve never seen before. Grimacing, I sit up. We are in a thick wood. The skies I spot through the branches tell that morning is quickly approaching. The four of us lay spread apart on the ground.

“Kal, oh, Kal. Kal! Are you dead?” It is the loudest I’ve ever heard Min speak. I join her and kneel over him. The sentry is covered in fresh blood atop of all the stains from before. I don’t know what to do other than to put a hand on his wound.

“Shhhhhh, shhhhh,” he manages to hiss at us. His eyelids barely flutter.

“Oh, please don’t be dead, brave Kal, please!”

I grab her arm with my other hand. “Min, he’s alive. And he’s shushing us,” I chuff. “He can’t be dead if he’s shushing us.”

“Saved us. He saved us. He was supposed to leave us behind, and he saved us, Goody, he saved us! Our mighty savior!”

“Min.” I try to interrupt, but she carries on about Kal until I raise my voice. “Min! Help me help him.” She calms a bit, looking into my eyes. “He could sift us, so can you heal him now?”

She shakes her head slowly, looking away. “It will take months for me to come out of the dark.” *Blast it.* “It’s a wonder he did that while he was hurt. A wonder. Sifted all of us that way. With his wounds. So strong. And after a week in the darkness. So much power. My savior, Kal.”

“He wants us to be quiet,” I say, not sure how much of this praising I can take. “Rip my skirts, and let’s fashion a bandage. We’ll wrap him as best we can.”

She nods. The sword pierced clean through his wing and shoulder. I wonder what happened to the sword in his flesh when his body sifted away. I shudder thinking of the pain he must be in. “Can we also wrap his wing somehow?”

“Hm...I can make a bandage with leaves. But only when we have more light.”

I keep pressure on him while Min works on the fabric. I glance up and see Goody still lying on his back. He looks so old and so frail, my heart drops.

“Goody? Goody, are you all right?”

“Good day. Good day.”

His response doesn't sound like the words of someone who is dying or in pain. I decide I will have to see to him later. Min gets to work on the bandage, swapping my hand on the wound for a bunch of fabric. “Hold his arm up, and I'll wrap,” I instruct her, trying to sound calm. She stumbles a bit with the weight of his arm, which is basically the size of her whole body. I wrap as fast as I can, staring at his wound. I think again about sifting us with a sword inside him.

“Wait.” I look at the location of the piercing. “I don't understand. How did the sword not go right through you, Min?”

“He dropped his arm to move me out of the way.” She sniffs. “He saved me twice. Brave, strong Kal!” Her words choke off as tears stream down her face. After the binding is tied as best as we can, I look around, and Min checks on Goody.

I can make out that we are surrounded by heavy trees, trunk after trunk after trunk, all around. The brush is very low, no big shrubs, no vines, just tall trees. We aren't in a clearing, but we also don't have very much cover. I can't make out a cave or boulder or anything but tree trunks in every direction.

I sit back a bit and try to relax. There is nothing I can do for an hour or so, until Min has the light to work on Kal's wing. I take a breath and savor the outside air. As the adrenaline starts to wane, I notice the chill. Kal is starting

to shake a bit. I step over to Min and Goody, sitting beside each other saying nothing, just staring up at the sky, crying.

“Goody, can you get up? Let’s lie together for warmth, with Kal. He’s shivering.” Min helps Goody up, and then they both hobble to Kal. They dutifully lie down next to Kal’s left side under his bandaged arm. I follow suit, lying on his right. I scrunch in closer to Kal, still the warmest of all of us. Min and Goody scoot into him too, all of us shaking from cold and shock.

I close my eyes. *Aster, I’m coming.*



I wake up to a squeeze around my heart as it pounds. Kal’s warm arm is around me. I pull away and sit up. His face is a wreck of blood and dirt. I can see clear tear streaks breaking up the muck down the sides of his face. He’s been lying in pain for hours.

Min is already tending to his wing. Goody is still lying on Kal’s side, eyes open to the sky. It is very light out, and the more I waken, the more dread fills me. Perhaps we’ve slept too long, stayed too long.

And perhaps my new fae eyes aren’t ready for light.

As I look around, I can see the stem in every leaf. Every single crack and scratch on every tree trunk. And the tree trunks—that’s all there is. Forever. No hills, slopes, rocks. We are sunk deep in a sea of trees in every direction. It is enough to make me dizzy.

I try to swallow my fear.

I can't really swallow. We need water. Badly. I listen, but there's no stream, no drips. The lack of it makes me smack my lips, totally dried out.

Panic finds me again. We got out of a dungeon, only to die in a forest. If we don't perish from lack of cover that leads to our capture, we will surely die of thirst. Only horrors, in every direction.

Kal groans.

"There, there, brave Kal. So strong," Min coos. "You're already healing."

"How long do you think until he is well?" I ask her. "He's going to have to sift us out of here."

"Oh, no, weeks. *Weeks* to recover. There's no way he has much strength left after such a feat. He was already wounded and poisoned before. Can you believe it? Sifting us all out as he did. So strong."

"So." I survey our plight. "We are in deep forest, with no magic, no powers, no tools, no weapons, and no water."

"We have a sword." She points to it in the dirt just beyond Kal's feet.

"Splendid. Maybe if I stab a tree, water and meat and medicines will spill out." I groan and put my head in my hands. *Stars, I stink terribly.* Again, water. We need water.

"Why would he bring us here, Min? Do you know where we are?"

"This is Hakken Forest, I'm sure. The Hakken, yes, yes." She answers me as if it is the most obvious of facts. I need

to quit underestimating her.

“So, you know where we are! Where is the Hakken?”

“Well, the forest is vast, so vast. And thick, as you see. So very thick. It borders Nalamar on the West side.”

“Is there a river?”

She nods. “There is, right up the center.”

“So.” I try to imagine a map in my mind. “Then it could be either east or west of us. Blast.”

“Good day.”

“Yes, we made it Goody! We’re outside! In trees, Goody, trees!” Min hops a bit as she says it. But Goody sits up, serious.

“Good day.”

I step to him. “What is it, Goody?”

“Good day.” He is looking behind me. I turn and follow his line of sight. All right, so Goody thinks the river is in that direction.

Or he sees a squirrel riding a pony in his mind.

We are definitely going to die.

I sigh, but Goody’s stare is all I have to go on. “Fine. I’ll go that way. East, I think.”

“You’re leaving us? No, Jaylyn we must stay together, we must! Don’t leave us, please!”

“Min, we need water. I can walk in that direction for a few hours and listen for a stream, and if I don’t hear one, I’ll walk back.”

“No. *No, no, no, no!* The Hakken all looks so much the same. The very same. It is known, one can go mad here. Even if you had the sun to guide you, which today you don’t, you don’t have it. You won’t know which way you came or went! Too vast! It is known!” She stomps her foot. I grunt in frustration. No one speaks for a minute.

“Okay, you’re right. Even if I made it, we have no canteen. I couldn’t have done anything anyway. What I wouldn’t give for someone to snap in some trays and glasses right now. Or wave their hand. Any kind of magic.”

“But you are fae now. You have magic.”

“I don’t yet. I had been a faerie all but a moment when I ended up in the dungeon.”

She stares at me for a while. Then, wordlessly, which is odd, she gets up and starts scurrying around us, looking on the ground. “Min?”

“You can do it. You can do it.” She chants as she crawls around on her knees like an animal.

Alas, I am stranded with a badly wounded sentry and *two* lunatics.

“Ah!” She comes back to me with a smooth, flat leaf, bigger than my hands. She holds it out between us. “You can do it. You saved us, Jaylyn. And you weren’t in the dark too long. And you are not wounded. And you’re not so terribly old and frail as we. You can put water in the leaf. You can.”

I shake my head at her. “What?”

“The water is all around. On the leaves, in the ground, in the stems and trunks. So very much water everywhere! Just move the water from everywhere,” She taps the leaf in my palm. “To here.”

Moving something that already is. Aster said it is such small magic, it’s like breathing. *Aster. Aster!* What I wouldn’t give for him to find me. Hug me right now. Can he find me in this strange forest?

My throat burns. *Jaylyn. Water now, Aster later.*

“But how, Min? How do I do it?”

“You feel it, of course.” She raises a shoulder. “You know it. You know there’s water in the ground, and you think of the leaf, and you tell the water to go to the leaf.”

“I pull the water up? With my mind?”

“Oh, it is so very hard to imagine *not* understanding this. Isn’t it peculiar, Goody?”

He says nothing so she looks back at me.

“You think about it, you will it, and you snap. Or you wave a hand. But a snap is very helpful for learning. Very helpful.”

I close my eyes and feel for the water all around. I think maybe I feel some water? I try to hold the feeling in my mind. I think of the leaf. Then I think of how badly I need the snap to work. Kal will die, Goody will die. Min will die. I’ll have to watch them die.

No. I have to do this. It *has* to work. I concentrate with all my might. I snap my fingers.

Nothing.

“Come, try again! You can, I surely know you can!” Min cheers. I nod and squint hard. My heart pounds. What if I can’t master this before Kal wakes up? What if our hulking protector savior sentry dies because I cannot figure this out? I snap again. Nothing.

We try over and over again. I rest. Min talks and talks. About the forest and Neymu and her home and past friends. There are smaller sky cities, sky towns, with much fewer humans below and a slower pace overall. She’d lived in such a place near the sea.

She had been a skilled healer, the most popular in her town. Seeing her with Kal, even powerless, this is no surprise. She lived in a nice home that even had its own tiny landing ledge filled with potted herbs and flowers.

While she speaks, I keep snapping. I try and try as I listen. I am so thirsty and so distraught, and poor Min is growing worried too. Kal shuffles in his sleep and grimaces in pain.

We try for so long, I lose concentration and start to absently snap in a rhythm. I don’t really think, I just feel a rhythm in the wind and through the leaves. I see water in my mind and snap to Welton’s music in my head, in time with the forest’s subtle beat.

Snap. Beat. Snap. Beat.

Snap.

Water.

Water!

“Min!”

We both squeal with glee and then quiet ourselves.

“I knew you could do it! Goody, she’s done it! Here!” She takes the leaf over to him to drink.

“Good day! Good day!”

Kal wakes from our squealing with a cough. He tries to prop himself up on his good arm.

“Oh, Mighty Kal, look, Jaylyn’s done it!” He looks back and forth between us. “Show him Jaylyn, show him!”

I am half chuckling at how confused Kal looks and snap again. Min is overjoyed. “*See!* Drink, Kal, drink!” she squawks as she takes the leaf to him. He drinks.

We watch him, as if he will say something about the water, about our triumph.

“More leaves, Min,” he finally huffs.

More leaves. Not ‘thank you, Jaylyn’ or ‘well done, Min.’ Only more orders.

I glare at him. “You’re welcome.”

It may be petty and childish, but I don’t care. I focus on Min instead, and soon I am back to my happiness. She scatters about, singing my praises, and brings me another leaf and another. She and I laugh and drink and drink again.

Min is helping Kal drink again when he stutters out, “Jaylyn. Her wings.” Min looks to me.

Of course. Her wings—I hadn’t even thought. I feel a wave of guilt and shame over my thoughtlessness. “Min, yes of course, I’m so sorry. I didn’t think.”

I carefully grab the sword from the ground and ready it behind the leather straps binding her wings. The sword is

frighteningly sharp and slices the straps clean through. Min lets out a sigh, whimper, laugh, and wince all in one. It's a thrill to see her shake and stretch them out.

"Good day," Goody says from the ground. Kal lies flat, grunting in agony.

"What can we do to help you?" I ask him.

"Perhaps"—his voice is scratchy but better from the water—"stop calling me a rat sack of winged weasel stone...whatever else." His words trail as if pain steals them from his mouth. I huff and back away from him.

"Good day." Goody looks at me and frowns. As if the ancient male wants me to stop being so mad at Kal. Min nods in agreement.

Did they not hear our story?

"I'll consider it," I say to the two sets of kind eyes staring at me. Not to the sentry himself. Min turns to him.

"You saved us. Oh, what can be said? Thank you is not enough!" She says much more as she embraces him. She lays her tiny head on his broad, bare, blood-caked chest. He just closes his eyes. He is panting and falling back into slumber.

We have water, so our moods have improved.

But our sentry—*the* sentry—does not look well.

He doesn't look well at all.

CHAPTER 23

Hours pass as we mostly lay on the ground, recuperating. I feel drained after gathering all the water, and my headache persists with the many sights, sounds, and smells. Aster's name still rings out in my head like a bell. The pressure has lessened, just slightly. I think adrenaline and thirst have overtaken my soul's cry.

How can I miss someone so much when I have only known him such a short time? This must be what it is to have a soulmate. To have someone out there missing you while you miss them. I feel badly for Aster out there somewhere, sleeping and waking to my name as well.

We stay low and quiet, hoping that the dungeon guards, who are sure to be chasing after us, aren't yet nearby. Min and Goody have slight headaches too. Whole body aches, probably. We chat softly off and on as we waited for Kal to get better.

But he doesn't get better.

Hours and hours pass.

"Fresh poison on the sword must have been, must have been." Min and I stare at his sweaty brow, watching at it twitches. Tremors have started running through him.

"Good day. Good day." Goody is sitting up beside us. He is lucid enough to agree we have a serious problem. "Good day."

"Yes, he's very sick," I confirm. Min just stares at Goody for a moment then gasps.

“Yes, Goody! Scallyweed. There must be scallyweed in these woods.” She starts scraping the ground.

“Tell me what to look for.”

She explains as she scurries, and I join the search under the groundcover for clusters of a small, short bluish-green weed. Goody searches too, hunched over and moving ever so slowly. I am not sure he should be up at all, but we need to find some of the weed, and fast. We can’t go far or shout across to each other, so I go back and forth to her as I find greenery. She tells me if it is too blue, not large enough, or whatever else.

“Here!” she squeals. *Thank Creator. Thank Min!*

I look at the bulbs she holds in her hand with awe and wonder. “How do we get him to chew it?”

“Good day.” Goody holds up a small rock.

“Yes, Goody! Such a smart one you are. My smart friend! Yes, we grind it to get the juice out.” She takes the stone and smashes the plant in her hand. Then she holds out the green goo to me.

Her hands.

They are utterly disgusting. I can only hope the potency of the weed will be enough to overcome the centuries of filth caked on like a glove. I nod at her. “Now we need to get him propped up. Let’s try to pull him to that trunk there.”

Min laughs at my preposterous idea. I quickly understand why. We all three grab him and tug.

This is never going to happen. He’s a boulder.

Instead, I get underneath him, and with a considerable amount of work, lift his head. I hold his thick, warm, muscular neck and his bulging good shoulder in my lap.

Why am I noticing his neck? Ridiculous.

The shuffling is enough to get him to squint his eyes open as I fill a leaf and Min scrapes her hand, mixing the dirt, green juice and plant remains into the water.

“Jalnnn Ja...” Kal mumbles my name, frantic, as if he is looking for me in a nightmare.

“I’m here. We’re all right here. Kal, you have to drink.” He remains delirious, distraught. I lean over him, straining to show him my face. His face is still twisted in confusion. I place my hands on his stubbled cheeks. “Kal! Drink! Drink this!” Min pours the liquid into his mouth. He chokes at the start but then gives a big gulp, gargles a sound like the mixture is about to come right back up, and faints.

I look to Min. “Was that enough?”

“Cannot be sure, not totally sure, but he is so strong, so powerful.”

“He is sure fond of fainting, for one so strong and powerful,” I chuff.

“The pain,” she whispers. “It must be very great. He surely is in agony.”

Goody stares at me as I stare at Min. I bow my head slightly, apologizing to the old faerie for not showing enough grace to my tormentor.

Min keeps talking softly. “It will be enough. It is a potent weed. It must be enough.” She prays to Creator and hums

songs and talks to—with?—Goody.

Once the afternoon light begins to deepen, I find myself starving, yet again, and starting to get frustrated from Min's talking in circles. She tells the same stories and asks repeated questions. To break up the cycle, I ask her to tell me all about the kings and kingdoms. She starts with her home surrounding us and her awful king, Zaynr.

He is as the legends have made him out to be. Cruel, cold, and greedy. Neymu exports spies, trained under brutal mental conditions, due to their ability to hear thoughts and other mind tricks. It also trades in secrets, collected through those same sets of skills. The very wealthy can also purchase wards and spells useful for keeping secrets, blocking their homes and minds from Neymu's mind manipulators.

Humans are indeed kept in shadow and worked to the bone. Min explains that in most kingdoms, elves have free reign of the mountains, but they don't here in Neymu. In kind, hobbits usually have—or had before growing extinct—dominion over the rolling hillsides to build their towns, but not here.

Everyone works in the cities, in separate species districts, of course, as is the law, maximizing output at all costs. Neymu has a wealth of food and magical goods due to the pace the workers keep. Zaynr is ruthless with anyone deemed disobedient, so much so that his castle has been dubbed the Palace of Screams.

“It sounds so bleak, yet you've also told me happy stories,” I wonder aloud. “Memories of the gardens and the ocean.”

“Oh, it wasn’t always this way. No, no, not before.”

Apparently, centuries ago the soul king had been keen and cold but still a noble ruler. No one knew for certain, but the songs and stories claim that after the death of his wife, the queen, when she gave birth to his son, Zellis, he fell deeply in love with an elven female from Arian’s kingdom, whom he caught spying in Neymu. But of course, their union was forbidden.

Soulmate. Aster! Aster!

Zaynr pleaded with his fellow kings, the council, to change the laws. He offered them anything and everything, but they wouldn’t agree. They didn’t trust that he wasn’t bending their minds and emotions simply to gain more power. His love was stolen from him and killed. Years of sorrow and anger turned his heart to stone.

The sad tale leaves me crushed.

If they wouldn’t let a king change his own laws, there is little hope for myself and Aster. My chest caves in. Min’s voice cuts into my thoughts. “Love will drive you mad, as they say. Love will drive you mad.”

“Do you have a soulmate, Min?”

“Oh, yes, I did once, Glenard. Oh, sweet brave, kind Glenard! Like Kal, just like Kal.”

I can’t help but smile at her reaction, her hands clasped over her chest. “How did you meet him?”

“He came in to be patched up after he’d fallen and cut himself badly. He was a wonder,” she sighs and blinks away wetness in her eyes.

“How did you know he was your soulmate? Did you feel this, in your chest?” I tug at my heart, which is throbbing due to our conversation.

“If I had been separated from him, I’m sure I would’ve felt that. Mm-hmm. He was brave and strong, like Kal!” She grows dramatic and excited as she hops up. For a moment she hovers, just a bit, like a hummingbird learning to fly.

“Min! You flew! You flew for a second!”

“I did? I did!” She pauses and then leaps. She hovers again and collapses on the ground. We laugh and cry to Goody’s happy praise using his two words. I am so overcome with the brightness of it, of a happy feeling, a good moment amongst all the dread and terror. It is a salve for all of us.

Kal sits up slowly with a groan. We must have gotten too loud. I clear my mind to find a rhythm so I can snap him some water in a leaf. Min tells him all about my snapping and his poison and her flying for a moment. He listens as he stretches and flexes, finding his bearings. He doesn’t respond other than to nod at her from time to time. He stands but starts to fall so I scramble up and under his good shoulder.

“Whoa, Careful!” I grunt under him. He is swaying badly as he glares down at me. As if I’ve done something wrong. “What? You’re clearly not ready to stand.” He sighs, and I help him sit back down.

He looks into the distance. “After nightfall. We’ll make for the river.” He lies down and closes his eyes.

“Wait, did you mean to bring us here? How close are we to the prison? How close are the guards?” He raises one

hand at me and another to his head, sighing. “After nightfall.”

He is infuriating. But also clearly still in pain. And our only hope of survival. So, we have more water and try to rest. I do fall asleep for a while, and of course I dream of Aster.

Aster Raellen. Aster! I spring awake, panting, hands to my chest. Min shifts next to me, nestled up beside me like a cat. Then I hear Kal stand up behind us.

“Let’s go,” he commands softly.

“Are you sure you’re—”

“Shh. I’m fine.” He is looking off into the trees. As much as I hate being shushed like a child, I understand with a chill. Our pursuers are out there in the thick, heading towards us. I nudge Min awake and motion to her to stay quiet. Kal scoops Goody into his arms with a stifled moan.

We start walking. Kal’s steps are quick and sure, even as he sighs and grimaces. Poor Min can’t quite keep up. She hasn’t been able to fly again either. Kal slows but not by much, and I catch Min’s worried face in a patch of moonlight.

I do what I must. I squat down and motion to my back. She nods and climbs on my back begrudgingly. Her bony arms clasp on, and I barely feel her at all. She is like a skeleton.

We need to eat.

We walk for an eternity under the stars. I pray Kal can make out the direction from the moon because every step

looks the same. On and on, the same trees for hours and hours. I can easily see this walk pushing one to insanity.

Eventually, I very much feel Min hanging on my back. Every joint is screaming by the time Kal stops.

“Leaves,” he pants softly as he sets Goody down. Min hands them to him and I sit, collapsed, against a tree.

“Let’s see it,” he says to me, putting a leaf in each hand. I take a deep, haggard breath. I am not sure I can concentrate enough to fill them. But the giant’s tone implies he doesn’t think I can do it. With a scowl at him, I pool all my concentration and fill one with a snap.

“Well done.” He nods. He looks away from me to wave his hand left and right. All the leaves fill.

“Your magic is back! Lovely! So strong and brave!” Min twirls.

“Really? And yet you had to make me do it? Of course. Make the human do the work for you,” I grumble. I want to tear his stupid leaf from his massive hands. He doesn’t seem to even hear me with his chugging. I join him. We all chug. And chug. And the leaves never empty.

“Can you sift us?” I finally ask. He shakes his head.

“That’s enough, we’ll be sick.” He lets the leaves empty, gathers them, and gives them back to Min. She tucks them away somewhere in his shirt, which she has been wearing as a dress since he gave it to her back in the dungeon. “Let’s go.” He reaches his hand down to help me up. I am numb with fatigue, but somehow, I keep my wits about me enough to stand *without* his help. I almost can’t bear the thought of picking Min back up, and he must see the dread

on my face. “Just a while more. Maybe tomorrow I can carry them both.”

He is a strong beast, I’ll give him that.

I look at him as Min climbs onto me. I feel badly for yelling at him about the water. He is exhausted, in pain, caked in blood and carrying a male faerie. He isn’t complaining. No, in fact, he offers to carry Min so I don’t have to.

A bit valiant, I suppose, but still unbearable. He’s unbearable.

Off we walk again.

I hear it before I smell it. A stream is whispering a ways ahead. The brush is growing thicker, and our pace is slowing in response to the terrain. Kal stumbles on rocks and brambles a bit more with Goody in his arms. But we are close. Stars and skies, I am so sore. So hungry.

Suddenly the brush clears to show the wide, babbling river. It looks so glorious, like seeing one’s bed at the end of the longest of days. It is the answer to the question our muscles have asked for hours and hours.

We don’t slow. We walk straight into the water with sighs of gratitude. The stream is cold but feels amazing on my skin. Min lets go, so I guess she can swim. Kal makes sure Goody can stand. Min lets out a cry of happiness.

“Good day. Good day!”

I am taken aback again, wondering how many decades it has been since they’ve had a true bath.

It's me who cries back to him this time, "Yes. Good bloody day, Goody! Good day!" And we all laugh and cry, and in the clouded moonlight, I see it just for a moment.

Kal's stone face actually forms a smile.

It's a hint, fleeting. But it is there. It shocks me for a breath.

In the dark water I can feel every mineral, every texture and temperature. It is as if I am swimming for the first time. I close my eyes and just feel. All of us take our time, wringing out our clothes and scrubbing and scratching over and over again. Kal barely winces, even though his wounds must be stinging.

Min gets out first, shivering. And then the next instant, I realize, she is totally dry. I look at Kal, but he is scrubbing blood from his hair. I think about Min's lessons. He...felt the water in the fabric and waved it out? Small, like breathing, Aster had said. *Aster. Aster! I'm coming.*

I look to the stars as I walk out of the water and tell my soulmate in my mind that I am coming back. Hopefully Aster, out there somewhere, feels it. I grab my arms in the breeze and in the next step I am dry.

"Thank you," I say to Kal, who doesn't acknowledge me as he gets out and sits. Goody is staring up at the sky again, and Min is fidgeting with her dress. Stars, I am so hungry. Do these fae not need to eat?

Min whispers quietly next to Goody, but she doesn't talk of food, from what I can make out. Maybe it is still the effects of my turning that have me so ravenous.

“Now, we rest,” Kal says as he lies down and closes his eyes. He clearly feels my gaze and ignores it. He doesn’t want me to ask questions.

Well, that is too bad for him.

“You’re a star sentry, so...can’t you lightning-strike us a fish or a rabbit or something?”

“Lighting takes more power than I have right now. There’s still poison in my system. Rest. We’ll eat at first light.”

“Do you know if they’re close behind us? And what is our plan? How do we get back to Connestell?” He doesn’t respond. “Answer me, you big, dumb, mute mountain!” I shove against him as I grunt my last few words.

He turns his head to me and sighs, as if he is irked. *Him irked with me!* It is unfathomable. What have I done but exist? Be captured? Tortured? Left behind, saved, captured again, put in a dungeon, and now left in silence as he broods?

Also, he needs to take back his blasted shirt. His chest is heaving. At me. He’s panting *at me*, obviously.

“They are not close by. We’re safe. We will walk to the sea, and when I am well enough to sift, I will get us across, and we’ll go north until we reach Raelus.” He speaks with such finality before he closes his eyes again, I shut my mouth almost involuntarily.

Unsure of what to say anyway, since I know nothing of where we are or where we should go—or how—I huff and get up, get away from him. I stomp over to lie alongside

Min and Goody for warmth, though I am feeling a bit warm inside, from my toes to my cheeks.

But I cannot quite put my finger on why.

CHAPTER 24

KAL

All right, then. This is my end.

I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping sleep will come quickly.

I have seen battle. I have clashed swords, taken arrows. I have had my mind invaded and my skin burned. I have been tortured. I have escaped death as a soldier, a worker, a beggar, a spy.

Yet here in this forest I have reached the extent of myself.

Not from the unsealing wounds, the poison, the sifting. Not from the unbearable pain all over. My wings scream, my skin aches. Every movement is a curse. No, all of those are known, welcome, even, when compared to my current lot.

Never again will I second guess a woman's powers.

Of persuasion.

Of persistence.

Of absolute, complete annoyance.

Why, stars and skies above, did I save her?

She is striking. Lovely. Passionate.

And a walking, talking torrent of human wants and needs and feelings.

Every moment is a new complaint. I can smell her fear. I see the longing and confusion in her face. There is

exhaustion and anger, but mostly terror.

And yet, does she feel any gratitude towards her savior from certain death?

Of course not.

That is not how my life unfolds.

Creator has no favor for me.

Of course, there is only hatred.

She is still huffing and sighing within an arm's length of me at this moment. I wish she were closer, and I curse myself for it. She loathes me. And with just cause.

I did leave her to face the fate table. I didn't enjoy keeping her trapped, hearing her cries. But I had no choice. I also saved her from a barrage of arrows after her spineless prince sifted away. I got her out of the dungeon, where she would've been interrogated beyond her strength. She would've died in that hole of filth.

Still, she wasn't mine to save. I did too much for her. I continue to do too much. And look at all the good it's brought me. This is not my way. I should be alone. I should be hidden behind my armor. But I am out here, exposed. I am...affected. Uneasy. Not myself.

And for what?

There may be a reward at the end of this, but the risk is grave.

What if I'm found out in Arian's Sky Kingdom? Worse, what if my truth is discovered here in Neymu?

Now, the two frail fae near me are different. I had to save them. No one could meet Min and choose to leave her behind. She is incessant, but I barely hear her anymore. The blinding pain all over my form does help in that regard.

As for the one she calls Goody, I have my suspicions. The way his wings were taken, the way he tries to communicate. If he is what, or who, I think he is...

Blast, I'm angry.

Angry at the girl. Angry at her prince. At all the princes and kings with their petty wars and pitiful pride. Angry at myself. Angry at Creator above who has, in his sprawling wisdom, long forgotten me.

Though, when all is accounted for, this is what I deserve.

Maybe by tending to these three lost souls, I will make amends for my grave mistakes. Maybe I will regain some honor. Maybe I will find some reprieve. Maybe I can protect the new little fae. Befriend her, even. There have been moments, breaths when her hatred seems to wane.

The ancients are grateful. And wise. They will follow me to safety without protest. Perhaps I can save them from future torment. Maybe Jaylyn will forgive me. And stop with her glares and her doubt and her questions. Maybe I will sleep well and wake up renewed.

What a farce.

No.

There is no happy end for me.

Not with my sins and my secrets.

That is not my fate.

CHAPTER 25

Meat. Smoke. *Aster?*

MEAT!

I lift my head and see Kal standing by a small fire.

Wait.

My mouth drops open.

Have I ever really seen him before?

He is a statue, truly. A perfectly carved and sculpted tower of hard muscle. He is rugged and tanned, his hair a deep brown, almost black. It is short instead of long like Aster's, falling just past his pointed ears. His strong brow and nose I knew, but now in the light I can see his cut jaw and wide full mouth as well. His eyes are not black, but a deep blue that I hadn't been able to fully appreciate under his helmet.

Blast, I'm staring.

He hasn't caught me looking, so I let myself take in his smooth fae skin and big sleek, white wings. Not all white. White with flecks of gold and silver-gray. With seven or eight wounds.

He stretches and flexes his arms and rustles his wings. He looks like the strongest being to ever walk the ground. Though it still looks like he should be in a good deal of pain, based on the gashes and scars.

I flush and look away. He is...something. All of him is remarkable. Not beautiful like Aster. *ASTER!* I feel such

strong pangs for him this morning...and for that deliciously fragrant meat.

“Rabbit! Rabbit! Isn’t it so very wonderful! Meat, Jaylyn, meat! You should have seen Kal catch it and stab it so swift. I helped make the spit while he skinned it. So strong and quick and smart!”

Kal doesn’t smile or look up, but I get the sense he doesn’t mind her constant worship. Ugh. He is going to be the end of my sanity out here in these woods, he bothers me so.

“Morning, Min.” I greet her with a smile. It is difficult not to smile at Min. She has ripped and tied his shirt to fit her tiny form much better.

So. Kal won’t be wearing a shirt anytime soon. *What!* I have to get a handle on myself. I must be going daft with hunger.

“Berries.” Kal motions to some leaves, and I bound to them barely fast enough. The bright red orbs burst in my mouth, like tasting a liquid rainbow. I eat two handfuls in a flash.

“Jaylyn. You’ll be sick,” he says, not looking away from the fire.

I just glare at him and drink some water from one of our leaves. “How far to the sea?”

“Days. A week.”

“And you can’t just fly us? Oh. You probably can’t carry all three of us while flying?”

Min gasps. “Oh, but he’s oh so strong, Jaylyn, look at him! He can carry us all, surely, he can. So strong and brave!”

He angles his head and eyebrows to Min in amused agreement. But I keep glaring until he actually answers.

“I can. When my wings have healed. The arrows in Raelus had poison too.” He pulls off a chunk of meat and hands it to me before taking some for himself. “Come eat, Goody.” Goody hobbles over. He and Min don’t seem to mind being ordered around as I do.

But, oh, the rabbit. Juicy and warm and so full of flavor, even with no spices. It is almost as good as whatever meat Aster gave me at the balcony tavern. *Aster. Aster I need to find you!*

I am on my way. Or so Kal says. I look at him, resolute. It is time for answers.

“What happened in Raelus? You said war.” He only nods. I wonder, if I slap his face, will it even register? “Kal. What war? With whom? Why?”

He glares at me. “Well, the king didn’t tell me personally, my lady, but there have been rumors Zaynr is bolstering his armies.”

“And is that why the starlight kept going out?”

“No. He likely heard starpower was faltering in Connestell and made his move.”

“The humans, do you think...” I can’t bear to ask if he thinks the graglins swarmed the human territories.

“Graglins had to be sifted onto Raelus, so I’m not sure they were also released on the ground. But if Zaynr means to conquer all of Connestell, it’s only a matter of time.”

I think of my brothers and parents and Welton. We all chew in quiet for a moment. “Why is the power faltering?” I ask him.

“Good day. Good day.”

Min turns to him. “Yes, Goody it is so very good. I think I could die now, clean, with berries and meat and my friends. Couldn’t you just die now Goody?”

Her friends. I am her friend. I feel a rush of pride, unsure there was ever a more lovable creature before Min.

Goody shakes his head that she misunderstands. “Good day. Good day.”

Kal just stares at Goody like he is trying to solve a riddle. Then he asks Min softly, “Have you heard of power faltering here in Neymu, Min?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know. Not while we were in the dark, dear Kal, we never heard much news of the world. So dark there.” Kal just stares into the fire.

“And how did you get us to the forest?” I ask.

“How do I sift?”

“No. Well, yes, I would also like to know that, but how did you know where to put us? And where the river was?”

He swallows another huge bite before answering. I think he enjoys making me wait. “The armada spend time in other kingdoms. I’ve been in the Hakken before.”

“So very smart! So brave and so smart!”

“Ugh, Min, please, you’ll ruin his head with praise.”

She cocks her head back, like I've struck her upside the head. As if she could never comprehend such a thing. Kal grins. I do not—will not—grin. “So, we walk days and days to the edge of the continent, and what if you still can't sift us across the sea?”

“I'll fly and carry you.”

“What if you still can't fly?”

He sighs. “Then we'll find passage through a portal door or on a boat.”

“And when we reach the other side, what then?”

“We keep heading north until I can sift or fly.” North back to Aster. *Aster*. I take a deep breath to calm my anxious soul.

Back to Connestell, to my mate and to Kal's reward. I wonder if there is a prize out for me already. If there is, surely the guards from the prison are fast approaching to claim me and get the reward for themselves.

Or, if the two kingdoms are really at war, maybe we'll be kept as bait. Tortured. Used against Arian. *And Aster*. Fear grips me with new fervor for the first time in a good while. I wonder if there will ever come a time when I am not afraid.

“If we keep moving,” Kal throws a bone into the fire and looks at each of us, “under cover, sleep in short stints, we will be very hard to find here. We're leaving no trail, I've made sure. We'll make it.” He is so calm and without doubt, it eases my nerves a bit.

“Do you think Aster could come here, find us in this forest?” I ask softly. Kal shakes his head and looks away.

He's said as much—with war starting between the two kingdoms, Aster shouldn't come here.

Talk of the prince brings Min right back to her dreamy-eyed self. “Oh, yes, a prince ought to be with his match! Soulmates must stay together. Oh, you must suffer terribly, Jaylyn. Pity you were not with him when the graglins attacked.” I don't say anything, but my eyes burn.

“He left her,” Kal growls. It is a true growl, low and deep. And then he stands to stamp out the fire before I can look at his face.

“Good day.” Goody spits the words with disgust.

Min just looks around, sad and nervous. Then she leans towards me and whispers. “So. Kal has saved you twice too.” My eyes burn badly with tears, so I look away.

Kal clears his throat before taking command. “We need to wrap this meat and get going.” Before we can ask questions, he stalks off into the woods.



We walk along the river all day, under the cool cover of the trees on the bank. After the heaviness of the morning conversation fades, Min starts her chattering. This time I ask her to tell me of the other kingdoms.

The Fire King, King Rast, is kind and fair but not quite as progressive as King Arian. Aster's father—*Aster!*—she confirms is indeed the kindest to humans. The freedom he

offers elves and hobbits seals my suspicion that I am lucky to have grown up in Connestell.

Lamento, Rast's domain, is a close ally of Connestell. I knew fire fae could produce fire and wield it to form shields and spears. It makes sense then that they export weapons. They craft arrows and swords and cannons, ready to burst into flames with a soldier's snap. I hope to never set foot on a fae battlefield.

The Flesh King, King Pelle, is kind but not strong. He doesn't want to change centuries of human enslavement, so he hasn't. But the lands of the flesh are rumored to be temperate, its citizens relaxed. They are mostly healers but a small few are said to shapeshift as well, making their armies formidable. I imagine the same fiery battlefield, now covered in fae lions and bears. Horrendous.

The King of the Ground, King Dreck, trades enhanced seeds and flowers and magic medicinal plants. From the sounds of it, his court in Girmah is less of a court and more of an orgy, delirious on leeky root. Min shares that the Kingdom of the Air and the Water Kingdom are the least powerful domains, which rattles me. The fae capable of changing the wind and mastering all water are considered minor threats? They trade in magical shields and tools. The lack of wealth across the lesser kingdoms makes life for humans there almost as bad as in Neymu.

Maybe living my life with Aster in the court of stars wouldn't be so awful. I won't mind the food or the orchestras or the night skies, to be sure.

But.

But not *with* Aster, not really.

He didn't even say he would try to make me his queen. Kal claims Aster left me behind, but it was such a blur of sentries and arrows and graglins, I'm not sure. He did let go of my hand. He did let us get separated. Or maybe that was his sentries' doing. It all makes my heart sink.

We stop to drink, and we've barely caught our breath before Kal barks that we must get moving again. I delay obeying him. But I can't let him and Goody get too far ahead because I would have to then run to catch up. I am in no condition to run, especially not with Min's extra weight. Finally, I squat down in frustration, angling for Min to hop on my back.

"Ugh. He didn't even give us time to eat."

"Oh, yes, you are always hungry, always hungry. That's why brave Kal always gave you his share of porridge. Mm-hm. Strong new fae needs to eat. Yes, she does."

My body lights to attention like a lamppost. "He what?"

"Yes, yes, kind Kal. Anytime you were sleeping or not looking he would dump most of his slop into your bowl. Sneaky kind Kal. And still he escaped. So mighty he is. Mighty Kal, our savior."

I am so blindsided by her words, I almost let Kal get out of sight. Kal gave me his rations? But he needed his strength to heal and to fight! Stupid brute! What could he have been thinking...

Me.

Kal had been thinking of me.

Perhaps he is a friend after all. I feel a swell of warmth. The swell travels right to my chest, and my chest screams Aster's name back at me. I remind my heart that I am on my way.

On my way slowly.

On and on and on we march. As always, I find a rhythm in our walking. Min will hum along to my feet, or I start walking in time to her humming. Even Kal seems to fall into step with us up ahead. Min takes breaks from my aching back to walk off and on. We stay on stones and fallen branches to keep from making tracks, which means our steps are uneven and require our full attention. Even Kal stumbles often. It is beyond exhausting.

Late in the day, the terrain begins to change, as does the air. We are climbing to higher ground within the forest. My thighs scream in protest as our path grows steeper, past waterfalls and up cliffs. In some places the river rages loudly beside us and our path is mossy and slick.

I find myself glancing at Kal's back and wings in between steps. His arrow wounds still look rough. He slips and grunts.

But he never puts Goody down.



At dusk we finally stop by a cave. We catch our breath, slowly swim, and drink. Even Min is too spent to talk. The rush of relief makes a whisper for Aster go through me.

“Your turn to catch dinner,” Kal says to me, out of nowhere.

“What? I can’t—”

“If I get hurt or captured, you need to know how.”

“You can do it, Jaylyn. Just think of the leaf! Only a few hours, and you mastered the water,” Min cheers, prompting the sentry to give that same smug nod of agreement towards her while still looking at me.

“But how? How do I know where the rabbit is to pull it to me? And I can’t hunt, I don’t know how to use a sword, I wouldn’t be able to stab it, so—”

“Blast, Jaylyn.” We all look up at him, surprised at his cutting tone. “Come.” He says, in his monotone statue voice. He walks to the river’s edge, but I don’t want to just follow. He is so infuriating, assuming I will just obey his every command.

However, to no one’s surprise, I am hungry again. I also know he is right about this. If something should happen, I must be able to take care of Min and Goody. Curse him! I sit a moment longer before rising slowly. I take my time walking over, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

He stands on a rock ledge jutting out over the stream. “See the fish?”

I look down into the water and see one pass by, then another. I nod.

“Look upstream as one is coming. Sense it. Don’t snap, wave. In the motion, pull it from the water to your hand.” He explains it as if it is so simple.

I see a fish and squint in concentration. I wave. Nothing.

“Again,” he says.

I try, twice more, waving my hand like a fool.

Min is pacing behind us with Goody looking on. I grit my teeth and stare into the water. This is madness. I clearly am not ready for this. And why is he pushing me? I’ve been fae for half a breath, while he could have had three fish cooking by now. This is just like filling leaves with water.

No, Jaylyn.

No, this is not about the sentry. This is for Min and Goody. Will I be able to take care of them? More unnerving, will I need to?

Kal comes close behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders. Before I can pull away, he speaks softly into my ear. His body warms my back from my neck to my ankles. “Clear your mind, Jaylyn. Calm yourself. Breathe in, and grab the fish.”

I am frozen, and indeed, all thoughts leave my mind.

I clear my throat to regain my faculties. Why is my skin pebbled and my heart racing? I shake my head and focus on the stream. I see a fish, breathe, and wave. Nothing.

“Again.” He whispers it this time, low and calm right to my ear. He is distracting, and his soft tone is disarming. This is not the guard I am used to. I shrug his large hands off my shoulders.

I see the gleam of the fish and imagine the feel of its scales. I feel it in the water, then wave. Then it is in my hand, wriggling.

It is in my hand!

Slimy and slippery and wonderful. I let out a squeal of delight to match Min's and laugh. *Aster!* My soul responds to the rush of excitement.

I put both hands on the fish and spin around to show them. But Kal is still so close to me. I spin right into him, his hands on both my arms to steady me. My smile vanishes. He steps back and mumbles a "well done" as I run to Min and Goody on the beach.

"Did you see that?" The three of us hug.

"Good day! Good day!"

Maybe it's the exhaustion, or the promise of food, but for a few moments I am elated. Min calls out that she'll start our fire, and Goody follows to find kindling. When Kal walks up a few moments later, he has five fish skewered on a stick. He says nothing as he takes my fish from me, but he is...grinning. The statue can grin. I remember myself and look away.

We eat and Min goes on and on about the fish, which leads to talk of legends of mermaids and unicorns and all kinds of silly bedtime stories. Kal does not say one word to us. I do not look at him across the fire, which takes effort, for a reason that escapes me. Irritation, most likely.

I focus so hard on what Min is saying, my jaw clenches tight. I will not think about Kal giving me his meals. I will not think of him teaching me to fish. I will not remember his breath whispering in my ear. I will not think about trying to get him to talk to me or to smile.

Instead, I will focus on how he did not help me escape and is only interested in my reward. How cold and silent he is. Kal is not now, nor will he be, my friend.

I try all evening to convince myself it's so.

CHAPTER 26

Kal wakes us—*Aster? Aster!*—after what feels like not very much rest at all.

“Hurry.” Terror starts to cloud my thoughts. Sentries must be quick on our tail. We are going to have to fight, and Kal will end up hurt, yet again. “Come,” Kal says calmly. “I don’t want us to miss it.”

What? Miss what?

He leads us out of the cave and picks up Goody with a veer to the left, backtracking up into the wood behind us. I put Min on my back so we can keep up with him. As soon as we are atop a ledge, up from the cave entrance, my mouth falls open.

A winding vine covers a large stretch of ground, glowing. Along the vine are beaming flowers that flare, larger than my hand, in bright shades of blue. They are lit up like fire, but not like fire. It isn’t starlight, it isn’t controlled or sparking. The plant has its own soft green-blue iridescence, gleaming from within. They are dazzling. Absolutely dazzling.

“Ooh, ponzifrawns! I haven’t seen these since I was a wee babe! So beautiful!” Min and Goody are, of course, weeping. My eyes burn as well at how lovely the scene is in the moonlight. Kal cuts a few flowers with his sword and hands one to Min, one to me.

Light moves within the flower like ink seeping into soft fabric. It glows brighter in some spots and has a slight pulse to it. I look up to find Kal staring at me, with a small

smile. His eyes glow in the reflection of the flower. I swallow and look back down at the bloom.

“Ah, here comes the dawn, watch them close, Jaylyn, watch them close!” Min whispers excitedly. As the sun rises, they do too. One by one, the flowers pop shut, forming big pointed bulbs. The flower in my hand clamps, and I hop in surprise. Min and I let out a little laugh.

After the flowers are closed, the glow goes out. In the growing sunlight, the plant looks normal, like any big flowery vine. “Oh, mighty Kal, thank you so much. What a lovely surprise, just lovely! Oh! Ponzifrawns, can you believe it, Goody?”

“Thank you,” I croak, startled.

Because that was a gift.

There is no value in the flowers. They don’t get him closer to his reward. He simply knew Min and I would like to see them. It is something a friend would do. He nods, saying nothing, and turns to pick Goody back up.

The rest of the day is without glow and wonder. Instead, it is endless, grueling walking, then climbing, climbing, climbing.

We stop in a stony clearing where the river has turned shallow. We’ve barely drunk or washed our hands when Kal straightens to his full height, very slowly. He turns to glance ahead of us, then his eyes hold mine as he turns to me and raises both of his hands.

In surrender. Kal is surrendering to forces unseen. Anxiety fills the air between the four of us, frozen.

Kal yells out, "We just want safe passage through to Port Nala. We mean no harm."

I search all around us with my senses. I see nothing in the trees. I reach with my hearing but find no breathing, no movement. Kal stands that way for ages, panting and expressionless. Finally, I hear the footsteps.

An elf appears through the tree line near us, arrow in his bow, locked on Kal. He must have been as far away as the long bow would allow, and yet Kal heard him. I feel a surge of gratitude for my soldier again. I would've been easily struck down if I'd been alone. A rush of panic twists my chest. *Aster Aster Aster!* My soul responds to my body's fear.

"Steady, faerie. I've more friends in the trees." The elf surveys our group. I can see his mind's gears are turning. He looks much like Stokker but with darker hair and skin. He is dirty, and his clothes are so tattered, he could be an escaped prisoner himself. His eyes dart around, noting our wounds and Goody's prison tunic.

The elf yells to someone behind him, "You were right, from the prison!" He smiles, looking between Kal and me, taking his time to look me over. "And at least one will catch us a pretty penny." Kal growls in response. The elf tenses. "Easy, easy. I'm the one with the spelled arrows locked on your head."

Kal calms himself and explains, "We've no money, but you can take my sword. Worth more than our return, I assure you."

"Nice try." Another male elf joins next to the first, looking much the same, only plumper and angrier. Along with a short stocky...man? No, a hobbit! A real hobbit, right in

front of me. He seems to have all the muscles of Kal, squashed down into a short body. A female elf joins them at the back, also looking tired and dirty. The three elves all have bows and arrows aimed at us, and the hobbit holds a formidable wooden club.

“Name your demands. I could sift you, fly you—” Kal tries. I have to assume he still can’t summon his lightning to strike them down. He has been trudging on and on with his wounds for days. And getting us food and water and drying us off. And carrying Goody. All small things that have worked to slow his healing.

“Oh, shut it, you overgrown fluffy bat. You’re in no shape to offer us anything, and we’d want nothing from the likes of you.” The elf sneers. The hatred that he has, the absolute disgust—it gives me an idea.

“Disgusting, aren’t they?” I say. The elf turns to me.

“They?” His eyes widen. “...Ahhh. You’re newly made. I’ve heard the table is worse than death.”

“It is.”

“Is this your maker, then?” The elf pulls back his bow with new energy. Kal’s eyes go wide. I start to pant, thinking. I have to earn the elf’s friendship without getting Kal killed.

“No, he is a wretch, but...but he at least saved me from Zaynr’s hell. He tried to take the court’s new prize from the palace for himself, a better fate for me than that court of darkness, but we were caught.”

“Zaynr.” The elf huffs the name and spits on the ground. “And these two? What do you want with them?”

Hmm. Min and Goody do make for two very odd companions.

“They knew the dungeon well, helped us escape.” I am trying to keep the tremors from my voice and my limbs, so hard that I feel I’m about to lose the contents of my bladder. I pray he’ll take up the yarn I am spinning. “Please, let us just pass to make it to the sea, get out of the kingdom.” He hesitates for a millennium as we hold our breaths. Then he drops his bow. Everyone exhales.

“You’ll need some stitching up if you’re to make it. Come on.” He motions for us to follow and then snaps back at Kal. “We’ll take that sword. No sudden moves, rat. My knives are many, quick and spelled with poison.”

Kal nods and shrinks his stature a bit. The elves guide us into the tree cover, and Goody struggles, so I put an arm around him. Min stays behind us, and Kal brings up the rear, followed by the hobbit.

In a small clearing, the leader elf snaps a fresh fire into a pit. There are stumps and stones around the fire, clearly one of their—or someone’s—usual camps.

“Jinny’s just caught some quail, Roga. See to it.” The slow, angry elf obeys, waving a rope into his hands. The rope he now grips has five big quail hanging from it. He gets to work on them. The hobbit takes a seat next to Kal. The leader sits next to me on a downed log. “I’m Patch, and the hobbit is Chonos.” Chonos grunts.

I tell the elf our names.

“Jinny, get the salve.”

I haven't been able to pay much attention to Jinny in my state of alarm, but as she snaps a large satchel onto the ground before her, I realize she is not wearing much more than rags herself. Her breasts are huge and barely covered by a thin shirt that has been ripped away. She wears pants that fit like my dancing robes, but tighter. She is taller than me, as all elves are, with typically elven long, lean legs and thin, sculpted arms. I look away, flushed at my staring and suddenly feeling awkward in my own short, human-but-not-human body. She takes out two small jars and hands one to me.

"For your scrapes, and theirs." She motions to Goody and Min and then walks to Kal, set on tending to him herself. "You're a big one," she says to him.

I do not like her tone. Why don't I like her tone? She is looking at Kal as if he is a chocolate biscuit she wants to bite. My jaw clenches when she purrs, "Let's see to your wings."

"Real subtle, Jinny," Patch says to her with disgust. I turn to him, happy to look away from Jinny and her biscuit.

"So, you catch escaped prisoners out here?" I apply a tiny bit of the thick goo on each of my scratches. My skin tingles and cools in a lovely way. I quickly hand the jar to Min so she can help herself and Goody.

"Not many of them. Mostly we look for guards, transports, anyone with some coin we can swipe."

"And you live here, in the Hakken?" I say, using considerable will to refrain from watching Jinny spread the cool tingling ointment into Kal's wings. I grow hot and then

angry at myself for growing hot. Why do I care what she does to Kal, anyway?

“*Live* is not the word I’d use. Live is what we used to do. The high forests were ours. Now we hide to avoid being dragged to one of the king’s cities. Ugh, Zaynr.” Patch spits on the ground again. I ask him more questions as we sit and wait on the quail. He is happy to share how terrible Zaynr is and how wonderful elven life used to be.

Centuries ago, elves and faeries had been friends, almost equals, he tells me. They lived peacefully in their own regions but with free movement to come and go between sky cities and mountain forests. They aided one another against magical beasts, sea snakes, and dragons.

“Dragons!” I let my human stupidity show again.

“None have been seen for centuries. But yes, dragons. As the fae magic started to dwindle, so did their affection for us. Our hobbit friends even more so, and of course you know how humans have it.”

“Do you know about the breeding centers?” I ask him.

“No, pray tell, what fresh horror have they come up with now?”

“If you haven’t found and married your soulmate before age twenty-two, men get Assigned lowly jobs shoveling filth or mining down in the poisonous deep and women? Well, women are Assigned to a med center and... impregnated.” I spit the words. Kal coughs. I am not sure if he is surprised at what I said or if he’s reacting to Jinny’s work on his wings, which seems to be taking her quite some time. I continue. “Not by men, it’s done...scientifically

I suppose? Or with magic? But even so, that becomes the woman's job, to bear more human babies, future slave workers, until she is too old to do so."

Everyone goes still and quiet.

"Blast me. That's sick, even for them." I just nod, fresh with anger.

Patch redirects the conversation to lighter topics. "Well, at least you're free now. As free as we can be out here."

"And do elves have soulmates?" *ASTER! Aster.*

"They do," he answers me. "It's a sacred thing for our kind as well, but I sure as hell haven't found mine." He laughs.

I turn my questioning back to elven traditions and magic. Around the fire, our spirits begin to lift. We eat and they even have ale, a tiny bit of which they offer me. Only me, but I doubt my companions mind much. We don't have arrows through our necks, and that is something. After all the bellies are full, I sense the mood change.

"Time to fix your chest," Jinny slurs, standing up and moving back to Kal. She stops in front of him where he sits, positioning her lithe body between his open thighs. I cannot believe how unabashed she is. And Kal—he is actually grinning!

He rests his hands on her ankles and watches her, looking her up and down as she lathers him with salve. Now she's become *his* biscuit. Fantastic.

The hobbit mutters something as he gets up and leaves, pulling Roga with him. Min turns away from the display at

Kal's feet and focuses on Goody, still finding bumps and scratches from decades of injuries.

I look back to the fire and feel Patch's attention on me. He looks over my shoulder to Kal and Jinny—now mouthing things to each other in a lusty haze—and down to my face. His eyes are intense. It's an intensity I know too well.

My mind goes immediately back to the tavern, with a full, drunk, too-happy customer in my face. I feel the familiar ripple of fear. My soul screams for Aster as my heart begins to race. I scoot back on the log Patch and I are sharing. He leans in and I jump up to evade him. "Tell me Patch, do you have any more ale?" He stands and grabs my wrist.

"Come, Jaylyn, haven't we been kind? Let's keep things friendly here."

"Let me g—"

Before I can get out the word, a knife slices into Patch's forearm. He lets go of me and falls to the ground, shouting in shock and pain. Jinny is down on the ground, and Kal has two more knives in his hands. Roga and Chonos are running back our direction now, and Kal throws the knives effortlessly, hitting each one in the thigh. I just stare, frozen. Where did all the knives even come from?

Kal quickly pulls his sword from nearby and puts it to Patch's neck. He also grabs the knives from the elf's boots. Once Patch has no weapons, Kal dumps their bows into the fire.

Brilliantly, he continues my lie. "You've no long-range weapons now, elf. I am a trained Soul sentry, as the made one said. If you follow us, your mind will fail you, and you

will find knives in your throats before you can hear me approach.”

Kal turns to the three of us, huddled together waiting for his instructions. He puts his arms and wings around us, and in an instant, we are squeezed away.

CHAPTER 27

Kal cries out in pain as the squeezing stops. We crash down on the ground, elsewhere in the forest.

ASTER!

Once again, we are shocked, panting and sitting on the ground, with Kal looking terrible.

What a lovely eternity I'm having so far.

"Thank you." I still feel the remnants of fear and Patch's lingering grip on my wrist. Kal doesn't open his eyes. "Are you all right? ...Kal?"

He nods, grimacing. "Water."

Somehow, before sifting, he grabbed his sword and our makeshift satchel that Min crafted from scraps of my dress and her wing's leather bindings. It doesn't hold much but it is helpful. I am amazed he moved so quickly and still thought of everything. What we would have done without him, I don't want to know. I snap the water for him and study his face, which is pulled tight. He won't look at me.

Min falls to pieces, as usual, "Oh, Kal, so strong, mighty Kal!"

"I shouldn't have sifted. I wasn't well enough." His words are strained, which affects me. But I don't know what to say. I've already thanked him many times.

"Here! Here!" Min brings over the jar. She thought to steal their salve. Wonderful, smart Min. "So smart Kal, to swipe the female's knives. So quick with your stealing and throwing. Amazing Kal, wonderful savior!"

He looks at me for a moment. I think about what Min has just said as his eyes strike mine. The glare feels like a chord on Welton's lute within me.

He had been taking Jinny's weapons while she drooled over him. And I'd been such a stupid silly girl, feeling hot with...jealousy? Yes. Jealousy. *So ridiculous!* And I'd completely missed what he was doing.

Kal closes his eyes and lies down. He sleeps while we eat some meat from her bag. Min finds berries, and once more we huddle around the guard, our mighty faerie, hoping he'll be all right.



Oh, and he is all right.

He gets us up at dawn, barking orders.

The day's journey is much more difficult. Kal and I have to put our passengers down to climb up boulders and around large tree stumps. He leads us up much steeper rock faces.

Min is able to hop up now and then using her wings, and Goody insists on walking in bouts, though doing so wipes them both out completely. We wind down slippery paths between the brush and stone. It is also warmer, so all of us slow in the heat, sliding and slipping.

My thoughts wander from my aching limbs, to fear of capture, to Aster and, involuntarily, to Kal. He is a mystery. An aggravating mystery. He says absolutely nothing all day

long. Min and I sing and talk, and even Goody chimes in. Our fierce rescuer offers not a word.

On one of the rock faces, I cut open my hand.

He rushes to me and finally speaks. "Let me see it."

But I ignore him and ask Min to help. If he wants to be my friend, he is going to have to use words. No more glaring, no more huffing.

Words.

That night at our camp, we have another meal of fish and fresh water. This time, Min yammers about her childhood. Even though I told myself I wouldn't try, I find myself asking Kal for information again. "And you? What about your childhood, your life? We know absolutely nothing about you."

His wings sag a bit. "It's not a happy tale."

"Um, look around, Lord Longface. Our tales are anything but happy."

He just chews. Not my friend. He doesn't want to try, he doesn't care to bond with us, with me.

Then suddenly he perks up. "Min, hum a song. A whole song, start to finish."

Pardon?

We all stare as if he'd just said, "Min, take that purple monkey and swing it around by its tail like a lasso."

After a moment, Min processes the request. "Um, all right! Anything for you, brave, strong Kal. How about 'The Fiery Maiden'?"

Kal turns to me. “Do you have a dance for that?”

I can feel my jaw hanging. Bloody skies, I am stranded in the kingdom of terror with *three* lunatics.

“W-what?”

“Oh, yes, please, will you dance for us Jaylyn? Please, oh, it would be so marvelous! Oh, please.”

Kal’s eyes are sparkling, but his face is as blank as the tree trunk against which he rests. Min and I rattle through a few songs until I find one we both know. It’s an upbeat crowd pleaser from the Whistler.

“Okay, for you, Min. But I am so sore and tired, my form will be rubbish.” I stand and shake myself out as Min starts humming. She actually has a lovely voice, if a little high-pitched.

Like a reflex, I let myself go. All the strife from the last few days goes into the stomp of my feet, the spin of my hand. I let myself have fun for a moment, and wings above, it feels wonderful. I talk in a few parts, sharing what the other dancers would be doing, or how the crowd would’ve responded. I explain the Whistler as I move and pretend Min is Welton and his band.

Min croaks out before she can end the song. “Oh, it’s just so lovely I can’t carry on! Thank you so much, so fine and beautiful, our brave Jaylyn.” She has tears pooling in her eyes again. But she and Goody have almost always been crying for joy, without end, since we left the prison. My heart overflows to see her happiness and hear Goody’s encouragement.

I don't want to look at him. I don't want to see the faerie's blank stare of nothingness after I've just bared my soul. But I cannot stop myself. Finally, I look to Kal, and for the first time ever he is really smiling, fully, transforming his whole face. His teeth—he does have them—gleam in the firelight.

He is stunning.

I have to will my eyes away from the sight. And when I do, I feel the pull. *Aster. Aster!*

Guilt slams into me. I just got lost in someone else's smile. Confusion follows with more guilt, because I want the pull in my gut to leave me alone just a moment. To leave me alone with my rescuer, possibly my friend.

Night falls, and I can't help myself. After Goody and Min are asleep, I whisper to Kal. "Are you awake?"

My whisper wakes him. "Blast, I'm sorry."

His eyes search mine, urgent. "What is it?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing. Go back to sleep. I'm sorry."

He sighs. "Well, I'm awake now." Awake and irritated.

I sigh too.

"Goody...I didn't have the heart to ask Min. What do you think happened to his wings?"

"Cut off. Torture."

Does he think me slow? I sigh again, exaggerating. "Yes, *thank you I gathered that*, but what kind of horrible offense loses you your wings?"

"If he was tortured so badly and still kept alive all these years, he was most likely a very valuable warrior." A

strange idea, as I look at the tiny, sweet lump lying nearby and try to imagine him as a mighty fighter.

“They don’t grow back?”

“They do, unless the wound is repeatedly burnt and not permitted to heal.”

“That’s so awful.”

Kal doesn’t respond. I muster my courage. “Can you tell me something, anything about you? You could be a crazed murderer. Or a lunatic who cooks and eats puppies.”

He smirks. “Strange fears to have about the one who keeps saving you.”

“Oh, fine. On second thought, just forget it. You’re truly terrible, you know that?”

“All right, stars, I’m sorry.” His face appears truly repentant. He pauses for a moment then cocks his head. “Dead mother, mean father, joined the armada.”

I wait. I wait for him to tell me more. To finally say some words and become my friend. But he doesn’t. That was it, his great revelation. Seven vague words.

I nod and turn my back to him and sleep.



I wake, mumbling Aster’s name over and over, as I have every day. The powerful stabs in my chest have all but subsided during the day. Possibly because of the difficult terrain. I am not sure I can take much more.

I also am not sure I can take much more time with Kal. He does not ask Min questions. He doesn't ask me how I am doing or ask anyone if they need rest. He just plods on in silence. He is leading a battalion. A commander is not a friend.

But he has saved me three times now.

In the heat of the day, as I feel nausea setting in from the pain in my legs, Kal stops us. He hands us our leaves, and the leaf I use as a bowl looks small in Kal's big, calloused hand. My eyes, without my permission, take in that he is still without a blasted shirt.

So, there he is in the sun, his chest sculpted and strong and gleaming with sweat. I catch myself staring. Which makes me flush. Which makes me angry. At him, at myself, at the sun.

"Min. Pippy flowers." Kal looks beyond me into the wood. I don't turn, I just close my eyes in frustration. I will not think about his chest or his abdomen a moment longer.

"How lovely! Such a special flower. So very unique." She practically sings her way over to the shrubs and then returns to put a hand on my shoulder. "Look, Jaylyn, look. The pippy is a dancer, like you!" In her hand before me is a flower. *The flower. From Aster. Aster Aster Aster!*

This one is bright yellow instead of green. She spins it between her fingers, and instead of a bird taking flight, it is just as she described. It looks like a dancer spinning on one toe. It is so graceful and special—and confusing—that I can't stop the tears. I quickly get up and walk away.

When we start climbing again, I turn to Min. I fear I hurt her feelings earlier with my reaction. On a less treacherous set of steps, I turn my head to tell her on my back, "Aster gave me pippy flowers."

"Ohh," she says sadly. Then she runs right away with the whole ordeal. "Why, such a romantic gift! To give a dancer the dancing flower! And to fill your room with its cheer! And it's delightful smell. Just delightful. What a wonderful prince, Prince Aster. Oh, I should so much like to meet him!"

Kal glares with irritation at Min's ranting.

"What, guard, is it not romantic?" I huff at him. He says nothing. But it is clear that at my mention of the prince, he *felt* something.

In the evening hours, after a climb that nearly wrecks us all, we reach a summit that is blissfully flat. The river is wide here, rushing past with fury. It roars loudly and cools the air around us. I have never been so weary to the bone. I cannot bear the thought of trying to catch dinner.

"Can you please just catch the fish?" I pant at Kal.

He sets his jaw before stating, "We have to cross."

Ah, fresh terror again. It has been, what, a few moments since the last horror? We were overdue.

CHAPTER 28

“Cross *that?! Now?*” I cry at him. He’s just led us back and forth up the cliff face to the side of the waterfall rushing off to our left. Up ahead I see a downed tree but not a shallow spot. Even if I could, at its current rate of flow, a slight slip of the foot will send us right into the rush, off the waterfall to our death. “Can you fly us across? It’s been days. Maybe you’re—”

“I tried in the night. There’s a strain on my left side. I fell.” My head pulls back as if avoiding a swat. I do not like the idea of him trying to fly away from us in the night. Or falling. Not at all. But he has come back.

For his prize money, I remind myself.

“Can we at least wait until morning?”

“It’s too open. On the other side, we will have cover to make camp.” He points across to an overhang of trees, but where we stand on this side is open rock and shrub. He hands us water and meat. We eat in silence, staring at what we are about to have to do.

Kal doesn’t offer any encouragement, he just guides us to the downed tree. It only crosses half the rushing stream. The last portion of the torrent is broken up by a few stones the size of my hand, and very far apart.

Our faerie starts, “We’ll go first. Then Min, get to the end of the tree and fly.” She chokes down a scared sound. He looks at me and commands, “Jaylyn, you come after her.” I wonder if he is secretly the top general of the whole Star

armada. He never bothers to be polite. I would mouth off, but he is already stepping on the downed trunk.

Once he steps on the tree it becomes clear how silly this plan is. With Kal towering over it and Goody in his arms, the trunk seems small, slippery and shaky. The tree looks to be as nervous about the ordeal as we are. He takes slow, sure steps. Min paces and whimpers. Kal adjusts Goody up and down for balance. An eternity passes, step by shaky step, before he makes it to the end of the tree.

There is no way he can jump the next span with Goody in his arms. No way.

I hear Goody protest, but Kal shakes his head. Kal leaps without using his wings and falls, landing with the stone hitting him square in the groin. He lets out a growl through gritted teeth. He adjusts his grip on Goody, and they slide off into the rushing waters.

“Kal!” I scream involuntarily. The water pushes them towards the falls like they’re merely a leaf floating on the surface. After a moment, in the middle of the current, Kal stops. I watch in disbelief as he braces himself against the water. He grimaces and pushes through, using magic to clear the water just in front of them. He grunts and sweats profusely. One of the wounds on his wings reopens.

The scene of a bleeding giant, holding a babe, climbing against gravity, straight up a raging waterfall, is nothing short of incredible. Min and I hold our breath and then cry out, gripping each other when Kal finally collapses with Goody onto shore.

“So strong, so brave. So strong, so brave,” she mutters again and again, clearly scared. I grab her shoulders. “Min,

you are a wisp compared to them. It will be nothing. And I'll be right behind you."

I am lying for the both of us. We just witnessed how fast the water pushed Kal downstream. If she falls, she'll be gone before we can blink.

Goody hobbles over to wait for Min straight across from the tree. Kal is still a pale pile of body panting on the bank downriver. Min starts. She slips, and fear stabs me in the throat with a gasp. She is so very small.

But I was right.

She is tiny enough to just crawl and scoot along the tree without issue. She reaches the end of the tree. She readies herself and squats down. All of creation stills in hope that her little broken wings will work. She jumps up and flits with all her might. When she crashes into the shore, her heels are still brushing the water's edge, but she's done it! Goody grabs her arms. We all take a moment to feel the relief, letting out happy cries.

My turn. Creator save me. I step onto the end of the tree. One foot. Two. The water is rougher up close, and I can't focus on my balance. I flail my arms.

A familiar despair descends.

I tense my whole body to keep from flailing again. Fear and sadness and anger rise all at once. I cannot do this. I can't. Kal is up now, limping over to join Min and Goody at my destination ahead. I look down at the tree, frozen. My eyes sting, and I chastise myself for not being braver, stronger.

“Jaylyn.” I hear him say my name, of course like a command, but I can’t look up. The water is so loud. “Jaylyn,” he says again, but my eyes are closed now, my heart thumping so hard I can’t catch my breath. I will fall into the current and have no magic, no powers to keep me from the waterfall.

“Jaylyn! *Jay, look at me!*” Jay. He just called me Jay. I look up at him, shaking. “Block out your emotions, feel with your feet.” *Focus on my feet. Feel with my feet.*

I feel the tree and my feet. If I can just put one in front of the other in a line. Which is like the motions in a chorus of Welton’s song. Focus on my feet. And the tree. I take a breath. *My feet. Tree. Feet. Tree.*

In the tree, I discover a rhythm, like the water somehow has a beat. It’s illogical and impossible, but I lean into what I sense.

Breathe. One two three. One two three. *One, two, three!*

I take six steps one after the other in time with that rhythm, eyes shut. I stop and open them. I am at the end of the tree! I catch my breath. “Yes, Jaylyn,” Kal calls to me. “The stones. Your feet and the stones.”

I close my eyes. I feel the rhythm of the river hitting each stone. One two three, one two three. I focus there, close my eyes, move forward and just...leap across.

I’ve done it.

I’ve done it?

I step on the shore, shaking, and Min rushes to put her arms around me.

“Good day! Good day!” Goody cheers . Kal nods and drops to his knees, panting hard.

We eat quickly and quietly, totally spent. Night arrives, and we fall asleep faster than we have any night yet, without a peep from even Min.



Thunder. *Aster Raellen! Where are you?* I open my eyes to see the rain picking up. Everyone else is already awake and tucking back, close under the stone overhang, to avoid getting drenched in the downpour.

I push so my back hits the cold wall. Thunder rolls and lightning strikes, causing my mind to flash back to Raelus. I am in the courtyard. There’s blood and flame and bone. Graglins run just in front of me, biting, growling, crushing bodies. I close my eyes, but panic creeps in until my hands shake. Kal’s warmth engulfs me. He sits by me, almost on top of me.

“Sit on your hands.”

I just looked up at him.

He explains, “It’s normal to remember battle. You’re safe.”

I do as instructed, too shaky to be annoyed. His tactic does still my hands, but it moves the shaking to my shoulders.

Kal puts his arm around me and holds my shoulders tight. “It’ll pass,” he whispers. I want to pull away, but I feel so safe that I just let him hold me like that. I fall back asleep.

We sleep off and on as the storm rolls through all day. I wonder if we've stayed holed up because Kal overdid it in the river. I am actually glad for him, that he is getting the rest he needs.

I catch myself staring at him as he sleeps. He is ever so gentle with Goody and patient with Min. He secretly gave me his food and fought guard after guard to get me—and Min and Goody—to freedom.

I feel a swell of gratitude, and something like duty. As I stare at his strong features, I suddenly want to help him carry the load of *us*. I want to thank him for saving us. My eyes move to his chest and the scabbing wound from the sword. I think of his whisper in my ear. His grin. My face heats...

Wait. I do not want to think these things!

I already have a soulmate, waiting for me. A handsome, kind prince, and yet here I am, under a rock in the rain, thinking about how I want to make Kal smile wide again. While still my soul is tied to someone else.

Which sends me into fits of guilt. *Aster*. I feel the pull of that tie to him, less sharp now, but ever-present all day long. Aster is supposed to be my destiny. His eyes sparkled at me. He wanted me, made me feel such strong feelings.

But Kal...the feeling I heard in his voice when he growled about how Aster had left me behind. Maybe that was anger at the dishonor, and not about me. He is gentle and strong, and perhaps it is about nobility. That is probably it. He is disgusted at what he saw as a lack of character in Aster.

That has to be all it is.

Since all day long he hardly looks in my direction. There is no affection from him. His reaction must be about virtue, in general, not me, in particular.

Giving me his food...must have been to keep his prized bounty from wasting away. After all, in Raelus I pleaded with him to help me escape, and he pushed me back into my plush prison cell. My cell where I waited to be turned through pain, without choice, made to serve the fae with my blood, my very identity.

Both Kal and Aster are my *masters*. My rulers. I should feel nothing but disdain for both of them. But that is decidedly not what I feel. I will make the most of my fate, and I will change things, with Aster.

Aster...Kal's entire motivation. Based on his dogged silence, it has to be his one desire, to return me and receive his hefty reward. He presses on, determined to hand me over to another male. He is strong and noble and intent on getting paid.

That is all. Not my friend. The thought of it makes me sad.

Jaylyn! Why am I sad over such a thing? All the emotions tumble around in my head so much, I become grateful for the chill in my feet. I focus on the feel of my body instead of my soul, and drift to sleep again, distantly thinking of Aster.



The evening breeze carries the storm off with it, and our tired bodies are famished. At least, I am famished, as

always. Min and Goody restart the fire. I open my mouth to offer to get the fish, but Kal already has two and is pulling a third from the river. We mill about and chat absently before sitting to eat as the sun is starting to set. Well, Min chats. During one of her few short pauses, Kal turns to me.

“Jaylyn.” All the hairs on my arms stand up at the soft, firm way he says my name. “I have an idea.”

“You know, your last idea got you stabbed in the shoulder, statue.”

He just rolls his eyes. “You haven’t slipped once while we’ve climbed.”

“What?”

“You have powers.” He watches me. I stare back at him, confused. I wait and force him to use more words.

“That’s not possible,” I state, remembering what Aster said, confirmed by what Min also told me. Made fae don’t have powers, only access to magic.

“Isn’t it? Your agility. I think the table gave you magic use of your balance, limbs, your reactions.”

“Oh, yes, it was like magic, the way you went across the river, Jaylyn, it was! It was! Yes, Kal sees you. You have power!”

Kal holds a hand up gently to settle Min down, grinning as he does so.

“Come.” He stands with a grunt, still slow on his feet, and he offers me a hand to get up. I consider it, and just this once, I take his hand to let him help me up. Only to stand, then I promptly let go.

The light is growing dim as he walks a few paces away. I watch his formidable torso bend down to pick up a tiny pebble from the shore. I have no idea where he is going with this.

And I should not have enjoyed watching him bend over that way just now.

Without warning he throws the tiny pebble at me with force. I catch it.

I caught it!

Even with hardly any light. Without much thought. I stare in awe at the pebble in my hand. I look at him and find his glowing, full smile. My heart involuntarily melts. But Aster, my chest replies to my heart. *Aster!* A new wave of guilt and confusion ripples through me.

But Kal throws another before I can get lost in my thoughts. I catch it. He throws high and low, and I catch them all.

“Now your feet.” He steps back, staring at me like I have any idea what he means. He says nothing.

“What?” I pant.

He picks up a stone.

“Would you please use! Words! Kal! Stars above!” He is exhausting.

“Kick, Jay, you kick!” He is exasperated with me as well. He explains in a slow, cooing way, like I am a baby, “I’m going to *throw the stone*, and then you are going to *kick the stone* with your foot, all right?”

But he just called me Jay again. It’s jarring.

I shake my head free of emotion and ready myself. He throws, and I miss. It is too dark now. Plus, he's too far away. Or maybe catching the stones was just luck. He tries again and again, and I miss again and again.

He seems disappointed. Which I hate. I also hate letting down the hopes of our elderly audience off to the side. Who am I to think I could have power, anyway? I am a barmaid from the ground. My shoulders slump.

“No!” Kal almost shouts across the beach. I just look at him, confused. “Quit feeling and thinking. Instead, focus on your feet. Close your eyes. Feel the stone come at you.” He gives me a moment. I feel my feet again and focus on him, his hand, the pebble. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

With my eyes closed I do feel. I feel him hurl the stone at me, hard. Without thinking I turn—no, spin—as if the pebble and I are in a dance. I kick the stone with my leg straight out in the air. Quickly, and hard. Beyond normal strength. And I feel it, when the stone hits the tip of my foot, I *feel* the magic in my toes.

“I knew it!” Kal runs and picks me up and twirls me around. It's the most excited I've ever heard him. Suddenly, we are both aware of how he is holding me up in his arms, chest to chest. He slowly lets me down and stares into my eyes as I slide to the ground, my body still crushed against his skin, all the way down. In the corner of my eye, I see Goody pull Min back to the fire.

We are panting but our smiles have faded now. He is so warm and smells so good, hints of honey and spice and sweat. My hands are on his bare, warm chest. His bulky

arms envelop my whole frame. I don't mean to do it, don't even want to, but I look at his mouth. I wonder about it.

Immediately I think of Aster's mouth.

Shame overtakes me and I pull away as if burned. I turn and rush back to the actual fire, eyes burning. Kal doesn't follow me.



Where are you! ASTER! I wake with a start and put my hand to my pounding chest. It is pitch black and cold. I feel body heat shift closer behind me. Kal's back is up against mine. I didn't feel him come to lie down with us by the fire.

I move to pull away from him, I want to, but I can't do it. His bulk nearby is such a comfort. I stop shivering with his body radiating warmth at my back like a fire. It's so cold, it would be silly to move away. I relax my back into his.

I fall swiftly back to sleep.

CHAPTER 29

For days, it rains as we walk. It's not a downpour but a spitty rain that grabs at your eyes. Min works with me on moving the air around my body to form a barrier. With her help, I also learn how to focus enough to dry my clothes—and hers—during breaks in the rain. I push myself to balance on stones as we go, to take the harder path in fewer steps.

My mind wanders to my human life, just a fortnight behind me. I wonder if war has reached Raetown, if the Whistler still stands, filled with laughter and music.

I feel the rain everywhere but around my eyes...

Because I am using magic.

Because I am fae.

I haven't even had a chance to think through what has happened to me. The madness of it all makes me sad—and angry. Stars, I grow furious thinking about everything. I also can't help my excitement at having access to magic and even a small power of my own.

Mostly, though, ever the stupid little girl, I twirl the same thoughts of Aster around and around. I relive that moment in the ballroom when I confessed I wanted him to be my soulmate. His response, when he said *I hope so too*. And when he said no one else would mean anything. But that means there will be someone else...*elses*. Plural, he said.

I think of Kal more and more, despite myself. He is not my soulmate. He is somehow kind but also unfeeling. He

doesn't look at me or smile at me as we climb, doesn't help me down the difficult paths, though I understand why. He is forcing me to learn.

But he doesn't watch me either, doesn't say, "Well done," when Min cheers. He pushes me and coaches me from a safe distance. Like a friend would. And he calls me Jay, like Welton does. I open my mouth to say something to him over and over, but he never looks back.

And what would I say? He isn't anything to me.

None of us speaks much in the rain. I don't think Kal has said a single word for these few rainy days. His face is completely blank, other than the occasional grimace of pain or a flash of thought about the path ahead of us. But I notice he completely shields Goody from the rain.

I wonder how much his small uses of magic here and there keep his wings from healing.

He catches our dinner without comment. He doesn't throw pebbles with me, but I haven't asked him to.

Around the fire, Min goes on and on about Creator's goodness to us that we found each other. She is sad for our troubles but thanks fate we were thrown into her cell. Kal scoffs at her, which he rarely does.

"What, you don't believe?" I ask him.

He thinks for a moment staring into the fire. "I believe in our Creator." He stands up "But I also believe in free choice."

He walks away, wings sagging, before I can ask what he means. Fae seem to have plenty of choices, while humans

have almost none. What does he have to be so sour about? I try to stay awake to ask him when he returns but fail.

I wake with a pang in the night in my chest, as often happens, and there is Kal, again. He must have joined us after the rest of us were asleep. He has laid again with his back to me, his wings and back touching all the way down my back and legs. But the way he huffed at me over the fire and then stalked away confirms he is just keeping his bounty warm, I am sure.

Thankfully, our next day is mild and sunny with a breeze. Min is herself again without the spitting rain. She hums and chatters and flies in longer spurts. Even Goody speaks up, pointing at a deer or watching the birds overhead.

As always, Min brings the conversation back to my romantic tale. She sighs about my dancing, our dinner, my ceremony.

And she starts to talk of a wedding.

She asks about my ceremony dreams, what dress, what flowers in my hair, and I fumble. I don't know what to say. My heart breaks—at my own destiny and also at how excited Min is to imagine something that will probably never be.

My cheeks redden and my eyes burn, and suddenly we've walked right up on Kal and Goody, who've stopped. Kal hasn't looked me in the eyes since throwing stones by the river. That hurts my heart too. I am overcome with sadness.

“Will you? Will you, Jaylyn? Will you have a big white gown with starlight jewels? Oh, you'll be so beautiful.” Min is insistent. But my face is tight, and tears threaten.

“Jaylyn, what is it?” Kal looks at me as he sets Goody down. Min climbs down too. I suppose I am not hiding my sadness very well.

“What? I’m fine.” I shrug and put on my best tavern smile, not wanting to break down.

“You’re heart-broken,” Kal says, suddenly exasperated.

“What?”

“It’s all over your face.” He is almost yelling, which makes the tears harder to fight off.

I storm past him, trying not to break into sobs. But he catches my arm, “Is your prince not going to marry you?” He intrudes into my pain, my private thoughts. And why?

“What do you care?” I pull away and stomp off, but surprisingly, this time he follows me.

“Your *soulmate* isn’t going to marry you?” He reaches out to stop me but doesn’t. “Jaylyn? Jay!”

“No!” I stop walking. “He cannot marry me, all right? He’s the prince.”

“So?” He stares at me with such intensity that I just let all the words fall out. “He can’t have a human—a made fae—wife. He’s going to be *king*. He has to marry a high lady.”

“A king can do as he pleases, can he not? And you... you went onto that table. For him.” Kal’s voice is low and hoarse.

“No, he cannot! Soulmates doesn’t mean married. He has to have an heir with a high lady wife, and—” I stop short.

“And? And what of you?”

“And I will still be *his*, just...not married.” I shrug. He is panting and keeps boring into me with his stare. “He’s my soulmate. It doesn’t matter. It’s fine, it’s *fate*. I can *feel* his soul in mine even now.”

I do feel Aster’s tug so strongly right now as I talk about him. I hold Kal’s stare and stand my ground. I don’t let myself cry. “What, Kal? What?”

He softens. After a moment he asks, “Do you want me to take you to him?”

“Yes, of course I do!” I blurt.

“Then I will.” He turns and walks back to Goody and Min.

There. Now they know. Yes, I went on the table. And Kal let that happen. He walked me there, for star’s sake.

Right now, in this moment, he could say he cares for me. He could confess something, anything, to explain having given me his food, taught me to fish, held me in his arms. He could admit if he is angry or jealous. Say he doesn’t *want* to take me to Aster.

But he makes no confession. And I shouldn’t want him to. I already have a soulmate waiting for me.

That evening, and ever after that, Min doesn’t bring up Aster anymore, thankfully. Kal doesn’t eat or sit by the fire with us. I tell myself that is plenty fine with me.

The moon is bright and low one night when Kal declares he is going flying. He is close, he tells Min, to being able to carry us the rest of the way to the sea. Soon this will be over.

I should be relieved. I start to get lost in my feelings again when I notice Min is not talking. She stares at her hands.

“Min?”

She is concentrating. Fervently. I’ve never seen her face scrunched up this way before. She holds out her hands to me, and I look. I am about to snap some water in her hands, and then I see it. A tiny frog, in her hand. A beautiful, shimmering bright-green frog. It jumps once and evaporates.

“*Min!* Min, that’s wonderful!”

We cheer and laugh with Goody. We cry again. We are crying fools, truly.

Right after our cheering, I hear Kal land.

“Kal! Min made a frog! In my mind!”

He is grinning at Min when he comes up to us. “Well done, Min. Very well done.” His words make her chest puff up. He doesn’t look at me at all as he lies down, back to all of us. The nights are still chilly, and I know I’ll miss his warmth, but I don’t lie down back to back with him.

He seems angry with me when he has absolutely no right to be. Why should he be angry at the puny human with no choice in any of this? I glare at him before lying down with Min. In the night when Aster’s name crushes me and I wake shaking, behind me Kal’s back is there again, warming mine.



Spring wakes us the next day with a heavy sun that warns of looming summer. We are so close to flying—or Kal is—and we’ve come so far. Those two facts keep us soldiering on, though Kal has slowed our pace and we are grateful for it. The terrain is rocky but not as vertical, thankfully.

Because I am sweating.

And Kal is sweating.

I keep catching myself watching the drops drip down his shoulders into his wings, down his back onto his pants. When he turns to give us water and meat—never making eye contact with me—his collar bones glisten. It is ridiculous how wonderful he looks when the rest of us resemble smelly drowned rats.

When the sun is hanging low, we stop to make camp under some trees. The river is smaller here, but we are beyond happy for the bath. Min and Goody and I eat, but Kal stays in the river, floating. I imagine it feels wonderful on his battered wings.

He floats a ways down river from us, but around dusk I hear him emerge from the water. I walk to meet him with some fish. I am determined to face the truth. Is he my friend? Is he concerned about my honor? Or is it there more to us than that?

“You need to eat.” I hand him the fish. He takes it but doesn’t eat any and doesn’t look up. I inhale, hoping bravery might be in the air. I say it plainly. “You think I’m a fool.” It isn’t a question. He needs to know I can handle it.

He makes a choking sound, though he still hasn’t taken a bit of fish, and looks at me. As always, I can’t read his

expression.

“I’m a faerie now, with powers, who gets to live in a castle with her soulmate. I’m a fool to be unhappy.” Finally, I look up at him, and he is staring down at me with that intensity again. It makes me sweat and fidget.

He is still and says nothing.

I ramble nervously. “Or you think I’m a fool for going back to a soulmate who can’t marry me.” He throws the fish down on the ground in anger and continues to stare.

“Kal, what? Just say it—”

He grabs me, his rough hands on my exposed arms. “*He is a fool.*”

I shake my head, “He’s a prince—”

“*He is a fool, Jay!*” He pulls me closer to him. I am melting in his hands, and I think he knows it. And I don’t fight it.

I protest softly. “He’s my soulmate.”

“And so? Now you’re stuck being his, what? His...his—”

“Don’t say it.”

He drops his hands and balls them into fists at his side.

What right has he to judge me for trusting fate? For wanting a soulmate, for considering staying with my soulmate even if it hurts. Even if it is cruel.

Anger. Anger is easier than the confusion. I lean into it.

“And what do you care, anyway, sentry? Are you my friend, now? Or still my captor?” He looks genuinely hurt.

“You know I’m your friend.”

“Do I? You kept me locked there, left me on that table, then you save me over and over, yet you don’t look at me, you don’t talk to me other than to bark orders. As long as you get your silver, what do you care if your charge is going to be someone’s whore?”

My eyes burn, but I will myself not to cry in front of him again. I turn and begin walking away. To my debilitating disappointment, he says nothing. He doesn’t come after me, so I walk faster. I keep walking to camp and sit down with my back to a tree, legs outstretched. I fold my arms and close my eyes to sleep.

I don’t sleep long enough to dream of Aster. Instead, I wake up in fits of sadness and confusion and frustration. And I am cold again. I am learning Neymu’s air is always damp, and the ground is continually wet. I miss Kal’s warmth and hate myself for it. I shiver as I push the thoughts away, trying to get back to sleep.

“You’re freezing.” Kal’s deep, rich voice startles me. He is sitting in front of me a few paces with a tight, furrowed brow.

“It’s not that cold.” I sniff. I don’t know what to say. I’ve said plenty already.

“Jay...the table...I needed you to live,” he starts. I sit up. His voice is soft, deliberate, and strained. I’ve never heard him sound like this before. “I thought it through a thousand ways. They would’ve hunted and killed you. Killed both of us. I couldn’t get you somewhere safe.” His deep blue eyes plead with me. “I’m sorry.”

I put my head in my hands and try to breathe, willing myself not to weep.

He whispers, "Please, you're cold. Let me hold you."

I should hesitate or refuse but I simply nod, still holding my face, not looking up. I want that. I want him to hold me. It is all I can think of. His comfort, his warmth, his calm.

He shifts over to gather me up in his arms and turns, adjusting to lean back on the tree as I had been. He cradles me in the same way he has been holding Goody for days upon days. And I feel just as small and helpless in his arms. I don't take my hands down from my eyes. It is all so confusing and frustrating and horribly unfair.

Kal locks his hands on his arms to hold me, not touching me or saying anything, just cradling. He is so warm, so safe and solid. He feels like...home. Within minutes, his scent, his warmth, his safety—they put me to asleep



Aster?

Kal.

Kal's arms are still around me. I stir and look up at him and around to get my bearings. The sun has been up for a while. How many hours has he been holding me? He loosens his arms, letting me pull out of his hold to sit beside him.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"We'll rest here today," he says as he stretches his arms. "Tomorrow, I can sift. Much faster."

“All right.” My face is flushed from the knowledge his arms probably lost all feeling ages ago, and there I sat, sleeping like a child. *Ugh.*

“I think I heard a rabbit,” he says as he rises.

Off he goes with a smile to catch something and feed us, again. And I sit, stuck, reeling, again. How can Kal feel like home when Aster is supposed to be my home?

I distract myself by helping Min with the fire. She doesn't say anything with her mouth, but her eyes say it all. Of course, they have been watching him hold me, for probably hours. What is there to say? That I am clearly a wreck, totally confused, that Kal...

Kal still hasn't actually professed any affection for me. But he held me through the night, totally unassuming. Totally for me, my comfort, my warmth. Just comforted me. Like a friend.

Actually, the thought strikes me that maybe he doesn't find me desirable the way I find him. There have been tense moments, brief glances, but moments can be imagined. The more I think about it, the more it makes sense.

If he had these types of carnal feelings for me, he wouldn't have held me like a statue overnight. He would've had to touch me. Aster wouldn't have been able to have me that close and not caress me, kiss me. Kal never takes me in with his eyes the way he looked over Jinny that night by the fire.

His kindness isn't just about the reward, but it isn't romantic affection either. He wants Aster to marry me, for my happiness and honor. He cares about virtue, and he is a

kind, caring friend. That is what he's been all along, and that is what he was last night.

A good, honorable friend.

That is the only thing that makes sense.

Isn't it?

CHAPTER 30

I stretch after the fire is going, sore and embarrassed from a whole night of being cradled. Kal returns quickly with the rabbit, which we all thoroughly enjoy after days and days of fish. Min keeps us entertained, as usual, but the day feels different. I slept so late, it is already afternoon and yet we are...relaxed.

And it is lovely.

Goody and Kal doze off after they eat, Min finds sparkling stones in the riverbed, and I go through some of my exercises and turns, trying to banish my stiffness. The males sleep on, so Min throws stones with me. I catch or kick them all with no effort, to our delight. She invites me to walk along the bank and find more weeds and flowers that may be of use. I learn so much from her, laugh with her, and find her chatter a much-needed distraction from my exhausted heart.

As she and I are walking back, Kal meets us along the bank.

“Would you?” He gazes at me, holding out the jar of salve. Min keeps on walking back to camp.

“Sure.”

I swallow. He is not attracted to me. I can put some ointment on him. It will be fine.

He hands it to me and sits on a large stone facing the river, positioning his wings right in front me. A couple of the arrow wounds have reopened and healed over multiple

times. My gut clenches to look at them and think of the pain, so I start with those.

But my fingers are unsure. I am afraid. Skies above, I am afraid to touch him. I have to get a hold of myself, my hands are starting to shake.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Kal offers softly, picking up on my hesitation. I start on his left wing, with a nasty hole in the center. I try my best to just glide it on in the direction of his feathers and hope for the best.

I have felt his feathers before, sort of, under duress in the dungeon, when we were covered in filth. Meaning I haven’t really. They are long and firm but soft as silk, and there are so many of them. I have to fight the urge to stroke him just to feel them all. The second wound is on his right wing, where it meets his back.

I rub, and he flinches.

I whip around to face him. “I thought you said it didn’t hurt!”

“It...tickles.”

I laugh. “You’re kidding me. You, Fae of Stone, are ticklish!”

“*All fae* are ticklish there.” He smiles his true wild smile that I adore.

“Okay, I’ll try again.” I go back to his wings. I try a firmer touch, pushing the salve harder into him, but he doesn’t wince. It feels good, to support him, to take care of him. To be his friend. “Thank you, for last night.” He gives a small

nod but doesn't say anything. I take a deep breath and walk around to his front.

He does not find me attractive.

We are just friends.

Oh, yes, and I have a soulmate halfway across the world waiting for me. *Idiot!*

I start on the gash at the front of his shoulder, from when he took a sword for me. I am so very close to him, with my heart racing, which he must notice. I have to say something to break this tension.

"I don't think I'm as good at this as Jinny."

He cocks his head. "Who?"

"The elf?" He waits for me to go on. "The breasty one who looked at you like you were a tart she planned to lick."

"Oh. I wasn't paying attention to her."

"Ha! You were. You may've gotten her knives, but I think you also started drooling at one point."

He laughs. "I did no such thing."

I take a step back. He doesn't have any other major wounds that I can see. And I find myself wishing he did. He holds out his arm to me. There is a huge gash on the underside that I hadn't even noticed.

I gasp. "When was this?"

"Escaping the prison."

"You've been holding Goody with this the whole time? Stars, Kal, you should've said something." He just shakes his

head and stares at me while I hold his arm. His skin is so warm. My heart is going to explode.

He is not attracted to me.

We are just friends.

And I have Aster. Sort of.

I finish with the cut and step back so he can stand up. I back up farther. I need to put some distance between my body and his body and to talk to him away from sweet Min, who likely can still hear us.

“Walk with me?”

I turn and start down the riverbank. He comes up beside me in one step, and we take our time, enjoying what is turning into a gorgeous, balmy evening.

“Thank you...for what you said. That I’m not a fool.”

“You’re not.”

“I’m fairly certain I am, but thank you, anyway.”

He lets out a sigh, so I wait to see if he will actually say something.

He stops walking. “I don’t want to take you back to him.”

I look up, mouth open. He searches my face with a fierceness that confuses me.

“You, you are a good friend, Kal.”

His gaze falters for a moment. I start walking again. Maybe he just can’t understand. “I know it’s complicated and maybe you can’t see why I’d want to go back. But Aster wants me, needs me even. I’ve never been wanted like that. You don’t...see me that way. But he does.”

“What?” He stops again, growling. He actually growls at me.

“Not just as a friend you respect but, you know, to *want* a person. Like, like Jinny and her tart.” I try to joke, to ease the awkwardness of coming right out and saying it, but he is so tight and serious his face is turning an odd shade of purple.

“You think I don’t see you that way?”

“It’s alright if...” Blast, I’ve put him on the spot. I swallow hard, so embarrassed, trying to smooth out what I said. I need to let him know I am not offended. “I under—”

“You think I don’t want you?”

“At first I thought maybe you did, but—”

“All I do is want you! All day long. Since the grape.”

The grape?

The grape in the courtyard?

Weeks ago. I freeze. And try to breathe. My turn to search his face. I wait for more words, prepared to hang on every one. Hoping he won’t stop. He slowly closes the space between us. “And if you were mine, there would be no one else. There would be no question, Jaylyn. I don’t care about the laws. I would cut them all down.”

“W-what?” I can feel the warmth of his chest he stands so close.

He continues through clenched teeth. “I would strike down every one. Every sentry, every lord, I’d burn the palace and kill the king if they tried to keep me from you.”

I almost leap into him, wrapping my arms around his middle. He envelopes me in his wings, with one hand spread across my whole back. His other hand lightly lifts my face.

He leans down and tenses. I close the gap when he stalls. That is all it takes. He puts his lips on me with fervor. I close my eyes and lean into him. I immediately open up to let his tongue meet mine. He lets out a moan as he claims my mouth, firm and sure. His tongue explores me with slow deliberation. As if he is savoring every sensation.

I definitely am.

The last time I kissed, I was a human. Now, I feel every bump on Kal's tongue, taste multiple flavors in his mouth. His lips are so soft and his touch so warm that I am going to combust. From just one kiss.

He pulls away and kisses my forehead and cheeks and mouth again as the tears fall down my face. He wipes them away. It's my turn then, and I kiss him with force and wanting. My savior and protector and friend.

Still, I cry because as I feel my heart swell with joy, it is still there, the tether, *Aster Aster Aster*. Kal pulls back from the kiss to scoop me up into his arms. He sits with me, shaping his wings into a cocoon around us as he just holds me tight, letting me cry. He strokes my head and rubs my back.

When I start to calm, he stands and walks with me in his arms. I nuzzle his neck and smell him. His hot scent fills me up, spices and honey—and his sweat, of course. I hold him tighter and tighter, trying to push out the guilt. But the guilt is consuming.

Someone else is my soulmate.

But Kal is my home.

It is insanity.

I've lost my mind.

He stops walking and sets me down while still holding me tightly, chest to chest, staring into my eyes. Beyond my eyes, even. Into me, my being. This time he pulls me in even closer as I slide all the way down his front. He bites his lip, studying me, but pulls away.

“Come.” Commander again, he leads me by the hand. We walk to a small cliff where I can see the forest stretching out to the horizon in the setting sun. He stands behind me at the edge and wraps his arms around me from behind. He kisses me behind my ear and then he says, low and hoarse, “My turn to take you flying.”

With a squeeze around my waist, he leaps off the ledge.

“Kaaaaaal!”

He holds me tighter and kisses behind my ear again. We soar out and circle, nothing below me and the treetops. Like I'm really flying.

He laughs, “Put out your arms!” Finally, I gather my courage let go of his hold at my waist and outstretch my arms. He squeezes me tighter still, spreading out his hands along my whole body and nuzzling my neck. I can't help smiling and laughing, overcome with the thrill and joy of the sensation, as if I have my own wings for a moment.

He takes a sharp dive to the river, and I grab him again at the drop. I laugh with relief when he levels out. He's

positioned us just above the river so I can reach down and touch the water with my fingertip.

I feel him flap his wings behind me and we are up again, cutting through the wind. I yell back at him as I start to shift my body around. "Don't drop me!" He laughs and helps me turn within his arms. I cling to him, just wanting to hug him, hold him. He kisses my neck and opens his one hand to hold my entire back and moves his other hand down slowly. He grabs a tight fist of one full cheek of my backside in his hand and I shudder.

I realize I am happy. So happy. To be with him, my friend, my hero who's put everyone else before himself over and over again for weeks. To finally embrace him, thank him. I think I might feel happier in this moment than even in my happiest moments dancing.

But. The happiness doesn't last long. It's replaced by guilt and sadness. Worry and anger creep over me too as Kal lands back in a clearing near our camp. After setting me down, he puts both hands on my face and kisses me, softly. He pulls away, and I can't read his expression.

"We need to eat and rest for tomorrow," he says as he pulls me to camp by the hand.

We sit and eat with our friends again, as we always have. He still says nothing, letting Min and I chat about the weeds we found earlier. But this time he sits next to me and keeps his arm around me. He squeezes my waist or puts a hand on my thigh. He tucks a hair behind my ear. He watches me. I enjoy it all so much. I want more. Just more of Kal.

After we eat, he lies down on his side near the fire and opens his arms for me to join him. I obey happily. He curls

his body around mine this time, my back to his front, with his wings forming a cocoon around us. My insides warm, and my heart races at the feel of him all over me. But he kisses my head and commands me. "Sleep, Jaylyn. Sleep." And I do.

Aster. ASTER!

I wake, as always, sometime in the night, chest aching and shaking with fear. But Kal is there. He pulls me into him and whispers in my ear, "I've got you." He gives me a soft kiss on the neck. I fall right back to sleep.

CHAPTER 31

When I wake, I feel the emptiness of where Kal was behind me. Min and Goody are sitting towards the clearing, eating some breakfast.

“Good *morning*, Jaylyn.” The teasing way Min says it tells me she knows precisely what has changed. But I laugh out loud when Goody matches her tone exactly with his, “Good *day*.”

Kal walks up to us, serious. “Min. Goody.” He makes eye contact with them both. “You are free. You owe me no debt.”

“But we do! You saved us, you saved us, Kal. We owe our lives to you and Jaylyn, oh, we most certainly do.”

“Good day.” Goody agrees.

Kal sighs. “You can build back your powers in Port Nala by the sea. You can take yourselves anywhere. Or I can take you first. Where is home?”

Take her? Can he sift now? And does that mean she can't go with us?

“So kind to ask, so kind. Brave, kind Kal. But everyone I love is long dead.” She says it as a matter of fact.

“And Goody?”

“Good day.”

“He is the same,” she states.

Kal's face is tight, as are his words. “Our journey still stretches ahead, long and dangerous.”

“Oh. Yes. Goody and I will slow you down. Much too slow, too weak.” That cannot be what he means. Surely we can’t leave them behind. Surely—

“No.” Kal is firm, and his tone quiets her rambling—and my doubts. He looks each of them in the eyes. “You are a help to me. You can journey with us.” His words make Goody stand taller than I’ve ever seen, and my heart melts at Kal’s kindness. “I don’t know what we will face. I wanted you to know you have a choice.” He looks at Min with tenderness, then he gives me an intense, unintelligible blank stare, and stalks off.

I remember suddenly all the reasons he drives me mad.

“Kal?” He doesn’t answer. We are absolutely not going back to this. “Kal!” He slows, lifting his hand to pinch his brow.

“We have to get back to Connestell,” he says.

“Right...” He just stands there, frustrated. I put my hand on his arm. “And what, Kal?”

“And then? Then what will we do?” He says it as though it pains him to ask.

I realize what he means, what he is asking.

I still feel Aster missing from my soul. Every moment it sits in the back of my mind—a faint feeling like thirst. Aster and I haven’t even had the chance to talk about our future. And he is out there somewhere with pangs in his heart for me.

Do I want to talk to Aster about it? About us? The pull in my mind says yes. But at the same time, I don’t know what I

want. Because I want Kal too. Badly.

He walks back to Min before I can answer him.

I don't know what my answer should be.

When I catch up, he is back to commanding, telling the three of us the plan. "I can sift far, but I'll have to rest a couple hours before we sift again." He turns to me. "From now on, everything is more dangerous. Fae here can bend emotions, change what you see. You won't know." Min and Goody agree. The three of them know these lands already. "Don't let anyone touch you." Goody takes hold of Min's hand and Min takes hold of Kal.

Dread and fear find me all over again. Not only is everything he just said absolutely dreadful, but I worry about his strength, his wounds. Is he really ready to sift? What happens if a sift fails? Where do we go? If we somehow get separated from Kal, the three of us are lost, dead. I close my eyes and breathe deeply. He grabs me around the waist, and I look up. He meets my gaze. "We'll be fine." Then we are being squeezed through space.

We land together, standing as we had been, but now in a grove of trees on the outskirts of what looks a lot like... home. Rows of human cottages lead to bigger stone buildings far off in the distance, but I don't see a sky city on the horizon. Then I remember with a shiver that we are in Neymu and look up. There isn't sky, only the underside of a massive black stone city.

Kal picks up Goody and motions for Min and me to follow him deeper into a grove of pine trees. The needle-covered ground means Min leaves no tracks ahead of me.

I feel a slight brush on my arm and turn. But everything is black.

“Ka—” A hand covers my mouth.

“What’ve we here,” says an awful, raspy voice.

A male is behind me, I realize now, a faerie or elf. His other arm is large and holding me around my waist like a lock. I start shaking uncontrollably. It is so terrifying and disorienting to have my eyes open but to see only black.

“Let go.” Kal commands.

“No, I don’t think I—” Then I hear the awful voice choke and a loud crack, and then a shattering sound. My vision blinks back to see blinding light. I put up a hand to shield myself so I can see. My eyes quickly adjust to the light.

Not light. Lightning.

The arms have dropped from me, and the faerie’s body lies crumpled on the ground.

Kal is...a storm.

He isn’t mighty—he *is* might.

He holds his left hand and left wing back to shield Min and Goody. His right hand unleashes blazing blue lines of concentrated light and power to the male’s chest. I move a step back from the heat, but one second later it’s over. I knew that Star faeries—that Kal—could kill in such a way. But to see it is different than knowing. Kal’s hand is still up, and he is drenched in fresh sweat.

“Jay?” He looks at me, terrified. I run to him, and before I reach him, he squeezes in Min and Goody and sifts us again.

We land on a hillside of long grasses interrupted by large boulders. I can smell the sea.

“Are you hurt? Jaylyn, are you hurt?” Kal has me in his arms, walking as he speaks, leading Min and Goody by the hand.

“No,” I say, but my voice sounds weak. “I’m all right, I’m all right.”

He deposits Min and Goody at the foot of the boulder and keeps walking with me. He has wrapped my legs around him, and I hold on so tight, shaking with shock.

His voice is higher, broken when he says, “I’m sorry. I should’ve heard him there.”

When we are around the other side of the boulder from Min and Goody he slumps to the ground and sits with me striding his lap, his wings walled around us huge and hard, a shield. My shield. He kisses my head, cheeks, mouth, neck through his words. “You were so scared and I— I’m sorry.”

I put my hands on his to stop him and look in his eyes. “I’m all right. Kal, I’m okay.” I realize with half a laugh, “You saved me *again*.”

He kisses me and grabs my body into him. His kisses before have been claiming, firm, but this...this is desperation. I kiss him back the same, recklessly. I put my hands into his hair, and he moves to kissing my neck.

“Jay,” he can barely say it into my neck, and I lose myself. I move a hand down his back to the beginning of his wings and rock myself into him, wanting. He slides one hand down my back to grab my backside, as the other hand finds my breast.

“Kal.” I can barely breathe out his name either. I need him and want him. Very badly. Totally. Completely. Immediately.

But this is more than base instinct. The feeling is warmth and light. I want to show him that I admire him, respect him. I want him to feel cared for like he has cared for me. I can feel him beneath me, the hard evidence that he wants me too. He presses up into me as I sink down into him through our clothes. Our thick, bothersome clothes. I reach one hand down to the buckle of his pants.

Then he pushes me back. “Not like this.” He cups my face in his hands and kisses me gently, slowly. His softer, slower kiss comforts me, soothes and calms me. He pulls my head to his chest and holds me, stroking my hair, kissing my head.

I tremble every so often, still recovering. I hear the whisper of Aster’s name somewhere in my soul but feel no pangs. No guilt. The shock of the assault and the stain of blindness shiver through me. Kal holds me through it, and I close my eyes.

We sit like that for some time. I feel so safe, so secure. I don’t want to move. I soon realize, however, that my mouth is so dry it is difficult to swallow. I can tell Kal doesn’t want to let me go when he stirs and kisses my head, pulling me up to stand with him. He gives me a soft closed kiss before pulling away and leading me by the hand back to the other side of the boulder.

He slipped off his satchel at some point, which Min and Goody already went through to get out the leaves. They already drank and drifted to sleep. They are eerily still next to each other, their backs to the stone. I feel a sting of

sadness for them, realizing that's exactly how they've sat for the last century.

Kal hands me a water leaf and takes one for himself. He glances around to check our surroundings. To one side of us lay more grasses, transitioning from dunes into field. On the other, after another dune, must be the sea hidden in the mist. Grasses and boulders are all I can see in either of the other direction, but the mist is close, cutting off my vision.

“Where are we?”

“The coast, east of Port Nala,” Kal answers.

“Are you all right? You sifted us twice in a row.”

“With that and the light, I'm spent. We'll fly at night.”

“So strong!” Min stirs. “So brave! Jaylyn, we almost lost you! Our brave Jaylyn! And Mighty Kal saves us again.”

“You should eat and then rest,” I say, looking up at him. I'm telling him what to do for a change, which I enjoy. He is already getting the dried fish from the sack. He hands me a big piece, and I shake my head, knowing he needs it.

He cocks his eyebrows at me. “Jaylyn. You'll be famished in an hour.” I open my mouth and then snap it shut, irritated that he is absolutely right. I roll my eyes and take only half of what he offers.

I push his hand with the rest back towards him and sit down beside Min, my back to the boulder. I motion for Kal to lay and put his head in my lap. He does, stretching out on his side, turned towards me. He tucks one hand under my thigh and the other wrapped around my legs, as if hugging a pillow. I stroke his hair out of his face, and he shudders.

In seconds he is asleep, serene and huge and warm. I watch him as he rests, feeling the weight of what he asked me earlier.

Do I still want to go back to Aster?

CHAPTER 32

Aster? *ASTER!* I shiver awake. The pang in my chest is strong now. Surprisingly so. More than I've felt in a week. As the sun starts to go down, the chill across the sea wakes us all. Kal catches us some crabs, and we eat quickly, anxious to leave the open grasses. We pack the satchel, and this time I put it on.

"You're *sure* you can carry us all? Do you want to wait until morning? Maybe wait until you can sift again?"

"Jay." Kal dips his chin. "It's like carrying three little kittens."

"Kittens! Did you hear that, Goody? We're like kittens, he says! Kal, our brave, strong, savior."

"And we need to fly in the dark," Kal adds.

Min is beyond excited. "Flying, flying! Oh, it's been so long, Goody, so long!"

"Good day!"

Kal holds Goody like a small child on his left side, and me in the same way on his right. Min holds onto me in between my body and Kal's. What if this is too much for my sentry and he won't admit it? What if he's too proud to say we should wait? Can we wait?

He readies himself and looks at me. "When we glide, I may need to shift your weight. I will not drop you, Jaylyn. It's fine, it will be...fun."

Before he finishes saying the word he squats down, and then with a thrust of his thick thighs we are up. A few flaps

of his massive wings, and he begins to soar, gliding on an air current.

Min lets out a “Wheeeeeee” and tears fall down Goody’s cheeks. I grip Kal for my life—for three lives. I am too terrified to join in their fun.

“Jay, I need to be able to breathe to fly,” he croaks at me. I relax my hold the tiniest bit. He turns enough to kiss my forehead.

I don’t know how he keeps finding air currents, but he doesn’t do much flapping at all. It is chilly but we have each other’s body heat inside the thin barrier Kal’s made around us. The mist is too thick for us to see stars or much ground below.

The flight becomes peaceful.

Min hums song after song. Kal kisses my head every so often. Any time I pull away to look at Kal, he is grinning. Like he has all he could ever want in the world. It ruins me with wonderful warmth and then terrible guilt.

Hours later, in the morning light, we are all a bit weary from the wind, but happy. Kal sets us down in a sandy grove of trees. We can hear the bustle of Port Nala waking in the distance. We sit down among some thick bushes that reach taller than Kal’s head when he’s sitting on the ground. We gulp water, especially Kal. It leaks out of his leaf, down his neck onto his chiseled chest. I watch, staring at his neck as he swallows. Suddenly I am very hot. I look away.

“Stay here. Drink. We’ll be right back,” he whispers to Min. I am about to ask questions when he gathers me into his

arms and leaps back up into the sky.

I feel that water on his chest with my fingertips and wrap my legs around him. He lets out a groan and squeezes me. I stretch up and kiss his neck. Feeling bold, I lick his neck where I kissed him. He drops a wing, throwing us hard to the side. I scream, and he gives a small smile.

He sets us down on a high boulder not far from the bushes we just left. As soon as he is standing almost upright, I start kissing him, demanding. I can't wait for him any longer. But he pulls away and takes a step back.

He looks out across the dunes. "Kal? What is it?"

"We could run." He says it so low and soft I almost don't hear.

"What?"

"We don't have to go back to Raelus. There are plenty of places we could go."

I sigh. I know what he is saying, but I just can't give him the answer he wants. He stares off into the distance. My throat closes. I grab his hand, and he looks at our linked fingers, then up at me. He is tender, patient, rubbing my hand with his thumb.

"Do you still feel him in your soul?" he asks.

A tear escapes my eyes. I don't know what to say. I do still feel the tie. But I don't want leave Kal's side, ever again. I don't want Kal to ever be not with me.

"I..."

"Do you still want to go back to him?" I grab his other hand, but when I don't answer, he pulls away from me. "Do

you?” He grits out the question and backs up farther, but he isn’t angry. It is as if it hurts him too much to touch me, to be close. My heart is breaking, and I feel his breaking too. Minutes ago, I could have died in his arms up in the mist.

But what if I wake to this pull in my soul, and fall asleep to that pull, and catch myself thinking of Aster the rest of my life? Which is now forever. What if my soul never feels quite right *for eternity*? What if Aster comes for me, hunts us down for millennia?

“I don’t know!” I sob. Kal’s face is stone as I step towards him. He doesn’t reach for me. And I hate it. He doesn’t deserve this. He deserves so much better, so much more. Shame and guilt wash over me. “You, Kal you should—”

“No! Jaylyn, no *I* shoulds.” He pounds his hand into his chest. “*I know* what *I* want...I want...” his wings sag. Then, deep and hoarse, he finishes, “I want to be enough for your soul. Even with your ties, you’re enough for mine.”

I rush to him and put my arms around him, but he doesn’t embrace me back. “Kal. I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know,” I cry into his chest.

Finally, he says, “But...I am not strong enough for this.” I look up at probably the strongest being on the planet, utterly confused. “I know you don’t know. But I can’t be... with you...on your way back to him.” He is breathing deeply, as if every word pains him. “I can wait. For you to see him. And for you to choose.”

He doesn’t look at me as he gathers me back into his hold. He pushes us up, and in a moment we are back in the bushes. He sets me down before lying down next to Goody, his back to me. I slide down to the ground and hug my

knees. I weep. My whole heart wants Kal, but the last thing I think of before I fall asleep in my tears is *Aster*.

When I wake up, Min comes and wraps her arms around me. Surprisingly, she says nothing. I hug her back. She pulls back to whisper, “Kal can’t sift yet, so strong but so tired now. He went to catch some food. So brave.” I stand up enough to look around over the tops of the bushes. The forest is not very dense, but it is hilly. The land rises around us, closing us in. I can hear it, though, the town. We can’t be too far. I feel a stab of fear and sit back down.

I don’t know what I should do, how I should feel. Fate is fate. The tightness in my chest shouts at me that Creator made me for Aster, and Aster for me. I think of his gorgeous eyes and how he laughed.

But Kal’s laugh.

The look on Kal’s face when I crossed the river. When I kicked the pebble.

The feelings of joy and warmth for him have filled me. His soft mouth on mine, his hot hands on me. And his gentleness. I never expected my giant protector to be so tender. I can feel desire building in my abdomen just thinking of his soft kisses, his small grins.

But it is more than just wanting him, it is wanting things *for* him. I want Kal to feel joy, to be at peace, to know how much he means to me. That he deserves every one of Min and Goody’s praises.

Kal walks into our thicket and plops down the bag, overflowing with blue berries.

“Ooh, gossier berries! So sweet, so delicious! Thank you, Kal, thank you.” Min prattles on. I feel Kal staring at me, so I look up at him. He gives me a handful of berries while keeping his eyes locked on mine. But I haven’t made a decision. Nothing has changed. I look away, and he lets out a long sigh.

He motions for us to get up and start moving. The hills of the forest make it feel as though at any turn or twist we could come right up onto the town without warning. Kal stops us often to freeze and listen. I know his hearing is far better than mine, and my heart stops beating every time we still.

It is slow going that way for hours. I find Kal staring at me, and I just keep looking away. It kills me, but I am thinking of *him*.

He deserves someone whose soul isn’t tied elsewhere.

He deserves for me to be fully his, wholly his.

And what of *his* soulmate? One day he might look up and meet the eyes of Creator’s female for him, his mate. His heart will instantly melt into hers. He will eat, sleep, and breathe her name. He should be with *her*. That thought enrages me and makes my eyes squeeze shut in sadness.

The longer we walk, the more confused I get. I can tell Min and Goody sense our tension. Kal grows angrier, and I catch him balling his hands into fists. I hear him sighing.

At the edge of a hill, before a clearing, Kal stops abruptly, catching us off guard. His whole body tenses, indicating someone is nearby. After an eternity, he relaxes and motions for us to sit. He puts his finger to his mouth again,

reminding us of the situation, before he pulls out water leaves, berries, and a bandage. It's a makeshift binding made from a strip of my dress we'd saved.

Apparently, Min has scraped open her foot. It looks painful, yet she said nothing. Not even a grimace. I had no idea she'd even slipped.

Kal holds her tiny foot in his hulking hand. He pours water from the leaf to clean it, blowing on the wound to help the pain. He ever so gently pulls a thorny stick out of the gash. Then he wraps and ties the bandage.

With his eyes, he asks if she is all right. She smiles and nods. Stars, she truly worships him. She leaps up to hug him and he cups her entire small head in his giant hand and kisses her on the head.

That's when I decide.

I can learn to live without Aster, without a piece of me.

I cannot live without Kal.

I am sure. I am sad, too, knowing I can't give him my whole heart.

I know what I need to do. I just need to explain it all to him. I need to make sure he knows the risk. There is a possibility I'll feel this nag forever.

There is also the risk that he has his own soulmate out there. That we'll choose each other and end up fighting. We already drive each other to our ends. We could end up hating each other, and then we'll have picked our mess over our mates.

But it is worth the risk to me.

He is enough for me.

“Kal,” I whisper, but he put his finger to his mouth, his eyes darting. It isn’t safe to talk yet. He won’t look at me as he sits down by Goody. I will tell him as soon as we can talk. The emotional turmoil catches up with me, so I close my eyes for just a moment.



I must have fallen asleep.

And we’re back in the dunes now?

How? When?

I stand up and looked around and see no one. Terror engulfs me like the mist.

“Kal?” I whisper at first. I run up to get higher to see, but the mist blocks my vision. “Kal! Min! Goody!” Nothing. No sign of them.

“Kal!” I scream over and over. I don’t know if I should run or stay. Maybe Kal sifted me here to keep me safe. But where are Min and Goody? There is no way I slept through all that. I look in either direction and can’t see beyond the mist. I look down and can’t make out any footprints. I am totally lost. My breath becomes uncontrolled. I close my eyes to try and focus on breathing so I don’t faint.

Then I open my eyes, and the dunes are gone.

I am back in the forest, and Kal is in front of the three of us, wings spread wide and sword drawn.

Min is shaking, whispering, “Not real. Not real. Not real.” She says it over and over. Goody’s eyes are squeezed shut.

Like coming out of a fog, I see what happened. Soul sentries, who just took over our minds, are on the ground bleeding out around us. But in front of Kal, swords drawn, are six more. Kal is still without some of his powers after sifting and flying. We are caught.

“Give it up. You’re had,” one of the soldiers spits. “Grab them and let’s take them to the captain.”

Kal lets out a low growl. “Touch only me.” He turns to the side for us to gather into his arms, like we’ve done so many times. Then he reaches his hand towards the guard. And we are gone.

The next moment, we are inside a stone building with a high thatched roof. A desk sits in front of us, where a male faerie sits, writing. He looks up at us.

One of the soldiers gives report. “Caught these hiding on the outskirts. Put up a good fight, took out a few of my patrol. Must be an armada deserter to fight as he did.”

Kal hangs his head and lets his hair fall into his face. He looks as if he is trying to cower, to make himself smaller. The official faerie stares intensely, with confusion, as he gets up from behind the desk. He walks right up to Kal and stares. He circles him as if trying to place his face.

Shock takes over the captain’s features.

He kneels down on one knee.

He’s kneeling?

“Your Highness!”

The other guards are baffled. I am baffled.

The captain commands, "On your knees, fools! Prince Kalamaeus has returned home." Kal grows in stature. His face turns cold and unreadable. He pulls himself up taller than I've ever seen him.

"I am wounded. Take us to my father." Kal pulls us closer into him again and reaches out his hand.

The faerie doesn't stand as he answers, "Yes, your excellency."

The next moment, we disappear from the captain's cottage.

We land in a throne room of gleaming black stone.

It takes a moment for my brain to register where I am...

Inside the Palace of Screams.

PART THREE

CHAPTER 33

The moment we land inside the Soul Palace, Kal steps out in front of us. I wait for panic to set in, but it never does. I am somehow calm, and my thoughts are slow.

Kal is Zaynr's son? ...That can't be right...

But he didn't deny it...He is pretending. To keep us safe...

I need to open my mouth to speak...Or maybe...I need to keep my mouth shut.

An entourage bursts into the room. Sentries walk before and behind a male faerie with the same dark features as Kal. He has the same strong brow above brown, almost-black eyes. Across his forehead is a simple black diadem. But he is considerably smaller and looks young, for a fae king. This is Kal's father?

"Brother! It is you! Father's prized spy returns at last." His smile is forced, and every word he says sounds like a threat. Brother. *Kal's* brother. He doesn't walk up to greet Kal, but rather walks around us, surveying.

"Hard to spy when your captain's mouth is loose." Kal's voice is in the commander tone I know so well. Kal is a spy for Zaynr? The Soul King, his father. Why can't I think? I feel that my mind is minutes behind what my senses see and hear.

"Must not be doing well of it with the wounds you've received...and quite the little crew you've assembled."

"Informants," Kal grunts.

“Informants? Two cripples and a...” He focuses his attention on me, stopping an arm’s length away. He takes a deep breath as he stares. His eyes light up. “Oooh, I see you’ve brought a newly made toy. Delightful.”

Kal keeps his voice flat. “They do not leave my sight.”

“But toys are for sharing, Kal. You can’t have all the fun.” He is taunting Kal for a reaction he does not give.

“Let me give report.”

“Will you report now, brother? One hundred years and not a single word. Not a peep, a whisper. Long, even for you. It’s enough to make one wonder where your loyalties now lie.”

One hundred years! How old is Kal? *Who* is Kal? I still feel no fear, which makes no sense.

“I’ll prove myself,” Kal says evenly to his brother, who paces, staring, smiling a close-lipped smile. He comes back over to me. He grows still, thinking, until his face lights up with another forced, wicked smile.

“Well, you’ve just returned! We should have dinner first, yes?” While looking me over, he purrs to Kal, “I would so very much like to get to know your companions.” He reaches out to take my hand, but Kal angles his body towards us. He pushes out his wing slightly, ready to wall us off behind him.

“They are not to be touched, Zellis.” Zellis Nuhm. Zaynr’s son. Kal’s brother. Zellis puts his arm down.

“Oh, Kalamaeus, always so serious. Come, all.” Zellis waves his hands.

My ceremony dress, which I was already practicing keeping clean and dry, is now instantly reassembled. There are no more tears or missing pearls, but it is now in a dark purple color. Min and Goody are in their same prison tunics, now new and without their decades-old stains. Kal's tan pants are clean, and he has donned a fresh black shirt and polished black boots. His hair is neat and gleaming, his face shining in its full beauty, which I've never really seen. I stare in wonder, until I notice it across his head. A small black crown.

So.

I didn't know Aster, and it turns out I don't know Kal at all either. I know I should feel sad, angry, but the feelings don't come.

Zellis and his guards lead us through a side door of the throne room with Kal in front. It is then that I vaguely notice other faeries on the outskirts of the room. They are filing towards us now. Zaynr's court. Does Kal know them? He must. He doesn't look at us or hold my hand.

Goody and Min walk between us as we are whisked through a portal door into a long, grand dining room. Intricate black starlight chandeliers illuminate sparkling black walls, black carpet, and sheer blackish gray curtains lining tall windows. A long dark wood table and chairs fill the length of the room. It is darkness upon darkness, but also deep and sparkling.

I register that the room should seem oppressive, dangerous, scary. But I am not alarmed. Something or someone is...dumbing us down? I can't think clearly enough to be sure.

At the far head of the table, Zellis sits. "Join me, my lady." He motions for me to sit beside him. Kal sits across from me with Goody to his left. Min sits to my right.

Next to Goody sits a severe male faerie, older than Kal or Zellis. He has dark features like Kal, reminding me of the portrait my mind had created for Zaynr himself. Next to him sit another male and a female, also beautiful and dark haired with bronze skin. Beside Min, down the table from me, sit more males, maybe twenty more faeries. None of them smile or speak at all. It is almost as if they aren't there, they are so still and silent.

I look to Kal, to Zellis, then to Min, who just stares at the food in the center absently, and to Goody, who stares straight ahead. Zellis waves again and fills our plates for us. "Eat, friends, eat. You look as though you could use it." Min slowly lifts up a hand and grabs a drumstick.

Kal looks down at Goody. "Eat, old one." His gaze moves from Goody to his own plate, not looking at me. It is so odd. Everything around me is odd. Is this a dream? Another mind trick?

Zellis keeps his intense gaze locked on me. "Now, tell me how you became of service to my brooding beast of a younger brother."

"I've agreed their secrets stay with me," Kal says with an edge to his voice, though his face is calm. Zellis's nostrils flare in frustration but his attention turns away from me, finally, when Kal says, "What of our attack on Raelus? Before my capture, it seemed the city was already won."

Kal attacked Raelus? No. Kal is a Star sentry. Not a Soul sentry. He was being attacked at my side, not attacking. If I

can even trust my memory. Can I?

“It was, no thanks to you.” Zellis cocks his head. “Would have been helpful to hear you were in Connestell.”

“You forget how spies spy, brother.”

“Yes, we’ve planted them far and wide in every kingdom, all of them reporting back much more frequently than you.”

“What of Arian?” Kal asks, ignoring his brother’s verbal jabs.

“Dead. Such a soft, pathetic weakling.”

Arian is dead. Aster’s father.

Kal clears his throat. “And the rest of his court?” The rest. Kal is asking about my mate.

“The prince and Lord Yen eluded us. Eridia survived, of course. That old beetle will outlive us all. They’re hiding somewhere with what’s left of their court, readying their ground troops.”

“There is not much to ready,” Kal huffs. “Arian was sympathetic. He allowed weak humans to live, even serve in his armada. His numbers are low, and his troops are a farce.”

Allowed weak humans to live? Is that what Kal just said?

“What of his elves?”

“Loyal, very skilled archers, but far smaller than our legion.”

“And he, unlike us,” Zellis purrs before smiling wide, “does not employ graglins.”

“Yes. How have we? Graglins have always been too feral to control.”

Zellis doesn't respond. He considers his brother with pinched eyes. He looks at me, then around our party. Kal says nothing, waiting. Finally, Zellis gives a wicked tight grin.

“Shall we show them, Dramadus?” Zellis addresses the older faerie. “It is rather glorious.” The dark prince watches me as he waves his hand. “Tell, what does your newly made friend think of our grand armada?”

Suddenly I am on a battlefield.

No. I am still in my chair at the dining table, but within my eyesight, between myself and Kal, I see a battlefield as if I were there. I can still make out Kal behind a curtain of images, shapes.

Zellis has gathered all the...dust? Light? in the air to form a scene. It isn't flat like a painting, however. It is as though I am really there. It takes a moment for my mind to sort what I observe.

I see a rolling hillside I don't recognize from Connestell. A black shape emerges on the left. Not a shape, a formation, coming down a hillside. Thousands upon thousands of graglins, marching in perfect unison. They move like one large machine, towards an arrangement of human soldiers. The graglins' eyes are all clouded the exact same way. I realize slowly that it isn't their natural eyes. They are all too uniform, too exact. Their movements are precise as well. I can feel the pulse in the images. They are under a spell.

The human men in the scene are so muscular and tall that I mistake them for fae at first. They look like they have a fighting chance. With a gust of air, the scene changes. To chaos. I squint to focus, to understand what I am seeing.

It's a slaughter. That's what I'm watching.

For every human soldier, there are two or three graglins. The graglins have swords but mostly use their hands. They work together to tear limbs and heads from the humans, as easily as plucking leaves from a stem. I feel a faint hint of nausea for just a moment.

Zellis's eyes gleam. "So many graglins below us all these millennia, just ripe for the taking. The fire sentries raged with their weapons, but look." I see graglin after graglin, on fire, still killing. He waves through the scenes, showing the graglins killing men, killing elves, some even killing fae fire soldiers.

The fire fae look different than I've ever seen them depicted in books or paintings. They are still muscular and beautiful but with varying shades of red hair. Their wings are a golden white. Like fire.

Zellis stares at me with ferocity as he moves his hand and the scene slows and focuses closely on human faces. In agony. He swipes to show, with time slowed down and in close detail, a man being pulled limb from limb, bones cracking and blood splattering like an explosion, then pouring like a faucet. I want to look away, but I can't. My head starts to throb at the sensation, as if my own thoughts are hurting me.

"She's no good to me broken, Zellis."

Zellis waves the battlefield away and turns his gaze back to the table. “As you saw, they are a force, even on fire. And lightning, we learned in Raelus, can only take them down after three or four strikes. We are unstoppable now.”

“Lamento is against us?” Kal asks, unaffected. Min and Goody are shaking a tiny bit, as am I. But I still feel almost nothing in my heart or mind.

“They are all against us. The High Council is weak. Pathetic fossils, with their yammering about balance and remembering the Great War and so on. All of them will kneel after Connestell is in ruins.”

“Soul over All,” Kal declares, and the whole table repeats it after him.

“Yes, Father will be so pleased to hear you’ve come to help us finish it. His famed warrior.”

“With your genius, brother, there’s little need of me. How did you spell those legions?”

Zellis says nothing, tilting his head to stare Kal down. Kal stares back, unyielding. The faeries around the table eat in silence, barely peering up to watch the discussion. They are afraid.

I should be afraid.

“I have shown enough for now. Time for you to share what you have learned in a century of spying.”

Kal sits back a bit, as if relaxed, and waves his hand to conjure imagery of Raelus before our eyes. It is not the same trick as Zellis performed, not like I am in the scene.

More like I am watching moving flat paintings. Still captivating, though.

“The starlight is failing, in all the lands, but most of all in Connestell. They have suffered major outages in recent weeks.”

“It has just begun to escalate here. Have you found the cause?”

“No. I listened in on Arian’s dozens of magi studying it, to no avail.” Kal continues waving through scene after scene, sharing information on each kingdom. Every kingdom. Kal has been to every kingdom, as a spy. He goes on about starlight. “In some areas of Amanza, the starlight has gone out almost completely. Magic there is waning. Soon smaller sky towns will lose their insulation and fall. It’s only a matter of time.”

It takes a few blinks for what he’s just said to register. Sky cities have magic insulation keeping them afloat. If Raelus falls without whatever magic holds it in the air, all of Raetown will be crushed. My not-so-silly nightmare will come to life, turning everything I knew growing up...to dust.

But Kal moves on to talk of court tensions and loyalties, feuds that sound petty to me. I try to listen, always behind a few sentences, but I notice how he speaks of them. He shares about each encounter as if he clearly knew which lord was lying, which prince was afraid. Zellis just listens and watches.

Kal waves the landscapes away and looks at his brother. “I was almost found out in the battle, so we fled. But we are

headed back to Raelus now. I'll inform you of their movements."

Zellis considers for a long while again, then sighs. "You've given it a good try, brother, but I am unconvinced. You're not convinced, are you, Dramadus?"

The severe old faerie next to Kal croaks out a startled, "No, Your Highness."

"I'll not have Father crucifying me for whatever it is you're hiding, brother. No. I think you'll be staying here for a bit."

"Zellis, we—"

But Zellis cuts him off by yelling for his captain. "Submit yourself or I'll have your informants submitting in no time, brother," Zellis threatens. Kal lets a soldier yank him up from his chair as other soldiers come to get me, Min, and Goody. A sentry grabs me, and my brain has no trouble understanding this part.

We are prisoners.

Again.

CHAPTER 34

A moment later, we are in an expansive sitting room with a large fireplace on each end lavishly furnished with plush sofas and chairs. There are no sentries with us, but, I now notice, neither are there windows or doors.

Immediately Kal picks up Min and Goody and leads me by the hand to a couch by the fireplace. He sets us down and crouches in front of us. His face looks strained.

“Breathe. Jaylyn. Min. Breathe.”

All the thoughts and feelings rush in like a tidal wave that has been building offshore for hours and hours.

Terror, heartbreak. *ASTER!*

Fear, loss, anger, confusion. *ASTER!*

My body convulses violently on the couch. We are captured in the Palace of Screams. Raelus was overtaken, Arian is dead. I am suddenly drenched in sweat and sick to my stomach.

Aster is in hiding? *ASTER! WHERE ARE YOU?*

My family will be dead soon, pulled apart limb from limb by graglins. So many graglins.

Min finds her voice with a sob. “Not real. Not real. Not real.” Goody vomits on the floor next to Kal. Kal wipes it away with his hand a second later.

Kal.

Who is Kal?

He puts one hand on Min's shoulder and one on Goody's and guides their bodies to recline back against the couch. Min curls into a ball and keeps whispering her chant. Goody sits back, eyes closed.

Both of Kal's hands settle on my shoulders.

His eyes plead with mine. "Breathe. Almost over now." I feel sick, my head aches, and I can't stop the shaking. He gets up onto the couch and gathers me into his arms, cradling me tenderly.

"Kal, you—" my voice is hoarse.

"Shhh, give your mind a moment while the throne room wards fade." He strokes my hair.

Kal is not a Star sentry. He is a Soul prince.

But I've seen him shoot light from his hand. Also, I saw him make images in my mind at the table. He did both...

Kal does both.

Kal is a half-breed. Another wave of feelings crashes against my heart and my mind. How? Who? Who is his mother? A star faerie. Has to be. But where is she? And when? How old, how long, so many questions, and still the emotions rise and fall inside me.

He kisses my head and repeats into my skin, "I've got you. I've got you."

"You're a?"

"Yes. Half-breed," he says softly. "Zellis doesn't know. I was in hiding."

I realize I'm crying, gasping for air, and the tears finally start to slow. My breath returns, but my mind is still trying to make its way out of the haze. My mouth is like sandpaper. Kal waves a glass of water into his hand and gives it to me. I pull away in order to sit up straight next to him and drink.

The water.

I am thirsty, and he gave me a drink. Without me asking.

He always seems to know what Goody means...

I stand up and back away from him.

Kal is a mind reader. I shuffle away and stumble backward, terrified.

"Jay, listen."

"You..." I put my hands on my head, as if they'll shield me. "You can read my thoughts!"

"No." He stands. "I only feel your feelings."

"And make me feel things?"

His jaw flexes. "No."

"But you could see inside my mind! You—"

I am at a loss. Surely there is no greater form of violation. From someone I trusted, wanted, someone I thought might love me...Has anything been real? He has probably manipulated me all along.

"I didn't *want* to feel you!" He almost yells it. "Fae hardly feel anything anymore, and then you...you burst into that palace *screaming* your feelings."

“And you used those feelings to pull my heart to you. You foul goon. Were you jealous of Aster? Wanted me for yourself?” I fling the words at him.

“Jealous?! I was content serving that old crone. My days were finally peaceful!”

“You should’ve left me alone!”

“Me leave *you* alone? You were on the other side of that door beaming emotion at me. Your whole body fills with it! I went from blissful almost-silence to *fear! sadness! fear! joy! FEAR! HANGRINESS!*” He runs his hands through his hair. Confusion flashes across my face at that last word. “You become insufferably angry when you’re hungry.” His frustration starts to dissolve. “You were so scared...and then there were moments you were happy. It...I...I only wanted to feel that from then on.”

I pant, reeling. This is too much. How many terrors can one being endure in a few weeks’ time?

“Your father is Zanyr?”

Kal nods. “He hunts for me, his...abomination. He must not be here, and we need to leave before he returns.” I can’t think about escape, or half faerie blood, or war. He felt all my feelings in the hall outside my door. Including with Aster. *Aster!*

“So, you felt me...with him.”

Kal grunts in disgust. “That prick. He’d already been with every female in the whole kingdom, so he must’ve—” He stops himself when he sees the pain on my face. Then he looks pained himself. “Yes. I felt you. With him.”

No. I feel too naked. Too small. How embarrassing for him to have been feeling me feeling *that*...feeling all of it. I have had no privacy at all. I still don't. Which leads me back to anger.

"Can't you just shut it out? Shut me out?"

He shakes his head. "It takes distance." I immediately start backing farther away from him. His face falls. "You'd have to be out of the palace."

"And Min, Goody?" I keep backing away.

"Everyone near. At all times." I turn and walk to the farthest corner of the room. He doesn't follow. I slump to the floor and ball up in the corner, holding my head. No tears come because there are none left. I just rock like a child, holding myself, trying to process it, us, him.

Waves of feeling build, but I don't want to feel them. I don't want *him* to feel them. I focus on my exhaustion. I concentrate on the pain in my feet, the pounding in my head.

Kal paces on the other side of the room. At one point, I hear him tell Min to drink some water. Min has gone quiet, and Goody seems to have fainted. Focusing on my body brings keen awareness to my hunger and thirst, having been unable to eat at the table or drink much of Kal's peace offering. Kal walks over and holds out some water to me again. I find the gesture to be extremely irritating.

"Look at me." His voice is soft, sad. "Jaylyn." I don't look. He clears his throat. "I have a plan." I look up for a moment and raise my brows so he'll go on. "You have to sift us."

"What? I can't—"

“Just a few feet. Zellis will bring us to the throne room. You get us to the door on the back left, behind the throne. Then we run.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Let me teach you.” He holds out a hand to me.

“And then? Out the door to where? Where will we go?”

“First out of the palace. Then we’ll decide.” He lowers his hand as I stand. I don’t let him pull me up, but I steady myself, ready to listen. “See that table.” He instructs. I nod. “Look at the floor just in front, and imagine yourself there. Don’t move your body there. Instead, barely move your foot forward, and as you do, *remove the space* between you and that spot.”

I stare at the floor and think about what he said. My palms grow sweaty, nervousness descending all at once. And then embarrassment that Kal can feel my nervousness. And then more anger that Kal knows I was embarrassed and nervous. I sigh. He sighs too. “Push all of that away. Breathe and focus on the space between.”

I concentrate and move my foot, but I just step one small space forward.

“Again,” he commands.

I try and try. I grow frustrated and scared and then angry about my feelings. Angry at Kal, angry at myself, angry at the stupid spot on the floor.

With a heavy sigh, he walks over to the table. He passes my target and turns to face me. “Sometimes it helps to have

an anchor on the other side.” He holds his hands out, low, and motions for me to come to him.

I use the moment as an excuse to stare at him. To really look. His shirt must be Zellis’s, too small and busting at each seam. It is open at his chest and his neck is glistening. His face is tender but strong as stone. My statue.

I think about the floor just before him, my hands on his chest. I imagine running right into him, my silent wall of a friend. I am not sure I want to run to him. But we have to at least get out of this palace.

He is breathless, but his face gives away nothing. I concentrate all my thoughts on him and move my foot. I am squeezed and pulled through darkness for an instant, then I am upon him, almost knocking him over, just as I’d imagined it.

“Well done.” He says it low and soft, almost grinning. His arms twitch, but he doesn’t raise them to grab me. “Turn and go back.” I feel hot under his gaze and start to feel a warmth I don’t want him to feel me feeling. I turn swiftly and move my foot. In a squeeze of black, I am back in the corner. I let out a happy laugh. I sifted. I am sifting! Even though I shouldn’t be able to since made fae supposedly don’t have access to power. But somehow, I do. I have magic. I am really a faerie.

I am a blasted faerie!

I turn back to him, fighting a smile. His smile has won, lighting his face, wide and proud. “Again.” I crash into him again, and still he doesn’t raise his hands to grab me. He just peers into my eyes, searching and hoping. I run away again, landing in the corner, trying my best to feel nothing.

He motions for me to come at him again with his hands. I do. Both my hands are on his chest, and I stare into his eyes.

Surely, he is real.

Surely our connection is real.

I look at his mouth, and he knows it, but he stays frozen. But it is also unfair, for him to feel all my feelings and know me in a way I can't know him. It makes me both heartbroken and furious all over again, for new reasons. He takes a step back as if I've told him to. Min joins us, walking slowly.

"Mighty Kalamaeus. Warrior Prince. You are like me," she whispers, full of wonder.

He nods at her.

"And now, Jaylyn can sift." She lets out a giggle.

Goody still seems locked in his own mind, sitting with his hands on his knees staring at the floor.

Kal walks over to him, and I follow. He tells them the plan. Sift to the door, run through. If it is the same as Kal remembers, the door leads to a balcony, a provision for quick escape in case a member of court is too injured to sift.

I stand, ready to try my next exercise. Kal wants me to sift Min and myself. In the throne room, I will have to imagine all of us jumping and should expect to feel the heaviness of taking them with me. But before I can take her hand, an armoire shape-shifts into a door, and in march four

sentries. Kal grabs my hand, and as he'd instructed, I take Goody's hand and Min takes his, bringing up the rear.

I put all my energy into imagining the door Kal mentioned. I imagine the throne room, moving the space between us. My chest thunders with fear as we near the armoire, now a portal door. Kal squeezes my hand, long and tight. *Clear my mind. Clear my fear.*

In a flutter, we are in the throne room, and thank Creator, the plan is in motion. Zellis comes towards us, saying something, but I focus with all my might. I can feel the cloud of the throne room's magic approaching my mind, trying to overtake me.

I move my foot. Nothing.

I take a deep breath and think of how bad it will be for Kal if his secret is discovered. If we are stuck here. I imagine him at that door, arms wide, smiling at me, waiting. In my head, it's just him and me and he tells me to come to him. I push hard through the mental fog. So, so hard. I move my foot, and in a flash, a heavy, painful squeeze, we are there.

I've done it!

I hear Zellis yell, and guards move as Kal pulls us through the door.

It is a balcony, but the edge is a long way off, and in the darkness, I can't make out anything beyond the edge. "Come, run!" We sprint to the edge as fast as we can, and Kal scoops Min and Goody with his right arm and grabs me with his left. Arrows fly at us, and Kal jumps. We slip off the edge, jostling and unstable.

With a garbled sound, Goody slips. I see him fall away from us.

“Goody!” Min and I scream. Kal dives. He makes himself an arrow, squeezing me and Min into him so hard, I can’t breathe. While diving, he shifts Min into me, freeing his right hand. He outstretches his right arm, and we slam into Goody, hard.

He has him by the tunic. Kal has him. He has us again. He always has us.

And we are still diving. At the bottom edge of Nalamar, nearing the ground, he makes a hard left so we soar around the city.

Kal lands us in a dark garden. There is no starlight, and the grounds have not been kept, as if it was once beautiful and has been long abandoned. I can hear sounds of nightlife coming from nearby. This does not look like a place anyone should be at night, especially not two half-bloods, a lame fae, and a newly-made faerie, all wanted by not one, but two kingdoms.

But my fingers are still in a firm lock with Kal’s. Despite all I don’t know, I do know I am grateful for his fingers holding mine as if he’s never letting go. I squeeze tighter still as I hear wings approaching, and as if my fae senses know something I don’t, a shiver of warning runs up my spine.

CHAPTER 35

Kal says nothing as he walks a few paces ahead into the darkness. Fear and dread pulse up into me from the ground with each step, until I remember Kal can feel my fright. And if Kal can, maybe others nearby can as well. I focus on the pain in my joints and the wooziness in my head from sifting all of us at once.

But I can't hold it in as I spot what I just heard—two black figures diving at us from the sky. They land and Kal relaxes.

“Kal!” A male faerie smiles at us, the one from the table. He sat beside the one called Dramadus. And next to him is the female from the table, also smiling. Kal almost bounds forward to shake the male's hand and clasps his shoulder. He seems relaxed, happy.

So...these are friends.

He hugs the female, and she gazes at him like anyone would, cooing in a creamy warm tone, “Oh, Kal, it's so good to see you.” I shift my weight on my feet and focus on my toes.

Hoping not to reveal to anyone and everyone nearby the fierce desire I feel to punch this new, gorgeous female in her throat.

Kal turns back to us. “Leto and Lana.”

My eyes have fully adjusted so I can take her in as she approaches. She is truly stunning. Her coloring is just as Kal's—as all Soul fae?—with thick, shiny almost-black hair

glistening down to her waist. Her corseted dress is slim-skirted, giving away her perfect figure. Her eyes are large, deep, brown, and kind. I hate that they are so kind. I put on my best tavern smile and extend a hand to hers, already outstretched.

Kal says warmly, "This is Jaylyn, Min, and Goody."

"Your *informants*," Leto says, knowing it is a ruse.

"So lovely to meet you, Jaylyn. Kalamaeus doesn't take many friends, so I know you must be wonderful." Lana's voice is like velvet, and her face is sincere. I give a polite nod. She moves on to meeting Min and Goody, and of course Min falls all over herself. Which I find irrationally annoying.

"So, why did you push this shoddy old garden into my mind?" Leto asks. "What's going on?"

"I was hoping you could tell me." Kal shakes his head as if confused. "Why did my father attack Lamento?"

"It was a test to see the graglin armies against a true armada, and the fire fae are some of the best."

Kal nods. "But Connestell is no longer the goal?"

"It was, for decades. But now with the strength of these new armies...I think the king plans to take on...everyone." Silence settles as Kal absorbs what his friend is saying. "Lamento fell so easily. This will be a bloodbath, Kal. It's good you came back, though a bit late, if I may say so," Leto half-teases. "You must talk some sense into him. And Zellis. Taking out Arian I understood, the cruelty, the grudge, we all kept our mouths shut. But this kind of devastation could ruin the whole planet. Your father's gone mad."

As usual, the sentry, the *prince*, just listens. Eventually he continues. "Have you seen him?"

"Our father has, in recent years," Lana chimes in.

"Your father?" I ask finally. Who even *are* these beautiful creatures?

"Dramadus. The king's high general and advisor."

Lana looks back to Kal, just staring. I wonder how long they've been friends, how well she knows him. She at least knows a part of him that I do not. Which grates at me. Then I am startled to remember Lana herself might be sensing my petty feelings. I focus on my muscles, tense as can be, and breathe deeply.

Kal's face is twisted in concentration. "I expected Zellis's distrust, but he seemed to want a fight."

"Yes, well. He may have been riled up by your friend." Leto looks to me then back to Kal. "Zellis has...hardened towards humans, even more than your father has."

I think of the humans below us at this very moment. Are they in chains? Are they warm? Are they fed? What do they do with the human children?

"Whose support does Father have?"

"No one dares question him out loud, of course. And many of the lords are blind from their greed. If Zaynr is to rule all seven kingdoms, they wish to stay as close to him as possible. Our father and a few others are the exceptions. Only they see the madness in it, but they stay quiet and put on a good show of false support in order to stay alive. I'm sure there are more like us." Kal just nods as Leto explains.

“The High Council has tried to reason with the king, but he hasn’t even been attending. He sends Zellis or Father in his stead. Zellis has been in frequent correspondence with Shess. Perhaps your father has promised Tuula better trade agreements once he has total control of all the realms.”

I think through Min’s lessons. King Shess rules over the air. Tuula is one of the lesser Fae kingdoms. What would the Soul kingdom need with him?

“Any others?” Kal asks.

“Maybe Pelle.”

“All right. And star power?”

Leto shakes his head. “You know much more about that than we do.”

Kal steps back towards me. “I need to think.” He turns and calls to Lana over his shoulder. “I’ll send word when I have a plan.”

“Of course.” She smiles at him. It is a delicate smile with such grace. She is a true High Fae lady, unlike... *Stop, Jaylyn!* I focus on my muscles with haste as my silly thoughts run away again.

“Really, Kal, after so many years, won’t you tell us your tales?” Leto teases, looking at our strange band.

Kal smiles broadly at his friend. “Not enough time. But I could use a favor...”



It will be a quick flight to another part of the city. Kal doesn't say where or why, but Leto seems to understand. Kal holds me, Leto carries Goody, and Lana takes Min. I don't look at Kal or think at all during the flight, as much as one can *not* think. He squeezes me, but he is serious, deep in thought, and soon we've landed.

Our feet meet another dark, seedy alley way. Leto and Lana whisper quick goodbyes and fly off into the night. Kal leads all of us, holding hands, farther down the street. He stops at an unlit door and knocks. I can make out silhouettes of faeries stumbling through the dark up ahead of us. *Focus on my feet. Focus on my feet.*

The door barely cracks open, and in the sliver of light, I hear a low laugh. "You old mutt." Then the door swings to let us in.

We are in a dwelling, similar to my stone cottage at home but much smaller. It's made of the same dark stone as the rest of the city and has a tiny fireplace, a small bed in the corner, plus a sink. But in the middle of the room, taking up almost the entire space, is a large dining table.

"What have you done this time?" The faerie is female, short and very round. White hair falls over her very tanned forehead. Her pale eyes look grumpy in her face, and her posture is deeply stooped. However, her disposition is cheery.

"Got shot. Poison festered." Kal hitches a shoulder as if he hasn't danced with death many times in recent weeks.

"Fool. You know not to let that happen." She gestures to the table, and Kal obeys.

Ah. It is a med table. He lays down on his stomach, and she takes in his battered wings.

“This will take a bit. What’ve you got for me?” In response to her question, he pulls off his crown and offers it towards her. “Oo-hoo, yes that’ll do! That’ll do nicely.”

“My friends are Min, Goody, and Jaylyn.”

“How’d you? I’m Eve.” She puts her hands on one of the holes in Kal’s wing. Her hands...glow. They begin to beam light from her palms as she moves. Min watches her fingers like a painter watches another painter at work. “I see you’ve got a foot needs mending as well, healer.” Eve dips her chin at Min, who straightens up at the idea.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing. Kal fixed me right up, no problem, just a scratch, only a scratch.”

“Yes, her foot as well,” Kal says firmly. “And is there anything you can do for him?” Eve closes her eyes as her hands do their work.

“No, his mind’s a scramble. Can’t see the knots to untie them.” She moves to the next wound, and Kal winces. “Oh, shut it, you giant baby.” She glances away from her hands to look me over. “Hard to read the newly made. Something’s amiss, but I can’t see it.”

“What? What’s amiss?” Kal pushes up on the table, startled, and she smacks him back down. “Do you want t’be put back together or not, brute? She’s not dying, not sick. Not hurt. Just...not quite right.” I push down the wave of terror and take a breath.

I look away from Kal, feeling...things. He is clearly in pain and still so concerned about me. I ask Eve, “I feel fine. Are

you sure?”

“Again, hard to read new fae. Could be you are all this way.” She backs up from Kal and flicks up her still-glowing fingers. “Sit up let me see that shoulder.” He opens the tight black shirt for her to see the wound that we tried to patch. She grunts in disapproval but holds her hands out. The wound vanishes under her glowing touch. Only a small white scar remains. I am mesmerized as she closes her eyes and concentrates more than before. She puts a hand on each foot, then reaches up to put a hand on either side of his head. Kal closes his eyes and breathes deeply. Eve breathes in deep too.

Min whispers, “Beautiful,” admiring Eve’s labor with tears in her eyes. Kal climbs off the table and pulls out the bench for Min to use as a step up.

“I insist,” Kal says before she can protest.

Eve takes off the bandage and holds Min’s foot in her glowing hands. She teases Kal. “Can’t get your mates any boots then?”

“Kal saved us from the darkness. No shoes there. No. But Kal saved us. Twice. So strong and brave, you should’ve seen it, sister.” Min is almost back to her old, doe-eyed self. Eve reaches to take both Min’s hands in hers.

“Oh, no, powerful sister, you don’t have to—” But Eve is already doing whatever it is Min was trying to reject. She puts her hands on either side of Min’s head as she did Kal’s. A tear streams down Min’s cheek, and she whispers a thank you.

Then Eve turns to me. She looks tired now as she offers her hands to me, palms up. I put my hands in hers and watch her close her eyes. I sense ribbons running through me. Streaks of fatigue, hunger, aches, and itches. She bends down and puts a hand on each foot, and blisters dissolve, pain stops. Lastly, she puts her hands on either side of my head, and the last of my exhaustion lifts away. When she opens her eyes, I realize that it, in part at least, must have passed from me to her.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have—”

“It’ll pass from me in an hour’s time. Not to worry.” She is panting as she speaks now. She turns to Goody and outstretches her hands.

“Good day. Good day,” he says softly as he accepts her help. It is so good to hear his voice again after the terrors in the palace.

“Alright, you lug.” Eve has to collapse back against the table. “What else?”

“Where is King Zaynr? Any whispers?”

“Starting his war, I reckon. But no one’s actually seen him in decades.”

Kal lowers his voice even more. “If I wanted to contain mind magic into an object, where would I go?”

Her face scrunches in disgust, “You know who to ask about such vile things, and it’s not me.”

He nods and puts his hands on her shoulders. He is taller now, stronger, full of energy and life. As am I, I realize. “Thank you, old friend.”

“Next time, come soon as you’re shot, please.” She smirks at him, panting and having trouble keeping her eyes open.

“Rest well.” He lets go of Eve and leads us out of her door, down the street to another landing ledge. He gathers us up and takes off with all three of us, mere kittens again. His face is hard when I glance at him, deep in thought about wherever we are headed. Which appears to be, to my great unease, a spot even farther down into the city’s dregs.



“Don’t speak. Even if spoken to,” Kal commands before knocking on another dark door in an unnerving alley. The air around feels like a pocket of dry winter, frozen inside the wet spring that cloaks the rest of Nalamar’s black stone. The door opens, and we enter without seeing who’s turned the knob for us.

We enter a room not much bigger than Eve’s but softer, darker. The small glow of maybe two lanterns reveals soft carpet, lush fabrics, and fine furniture filling the space. Instead of a large med table, a small circular table sits in the center surrounded by padded fae chairs.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of the Prince of Souls and his...friends?” A creaking voice says from the far corner. The voice belongs to a body as tall as Kal’s but as frail as Goody’s. His thin, cockeyed mouth, missing teeth, is set in skin lined by millennia, below gray eyes so light he almost doesn’t have eyes at all. His wings have been...no, no wings. Large, sharply pointed ears. He is an elf.

“A peculiar question,” Kal answers.

“My favorite variety.” The elf smiles a chilling grin that makes my insides begin to churn.

“How could I capture my powers over the mind into an object?”

“Tsk, tsk,” the Elf chides. “You know the price, mighty one.”

“Proceed with caution, Seer.” Kal’s entire body tenses beside me.

Seer? Oh. This elf can see the future. I shudder, wondering what the price for such knowledge could possibly be.

“Whose is she?” The Seer stares at me.

“Mine,” Kal answers.

The ancient elf’s face twists with anger as he spits, “If you did not wish to pay then you should not have woken me!”

Kal sighs and responds through gritted teeth, “Aster Raellen.”

The seer just stands, staring at me, without blinking. Finally, he blinks once and turns back to Kal.

“You would need many powers combined together to do such a thing.”

“Which powers?”

The elf quickly gives another question for Kal. “How did a royal Starlight mate end up in the embrace of the Prince of the Soul?”

“I saved her during the graglin attack on Raelus.”

“You’d need Fire, Wind, Soul, Earth.”

Kal grows more perturbed with each question but goes on. “Did my father or Zellis come to you for this information?”

The elf spits back, “How did you hide your identity in the City of the Stars?”

“With my mind.”

The elf stomps his foot with surprising force. “You do not get true answers if you do not give them!”

“I was a spy, hiding, in disguise.”

“Hmm...” He weighs Kal’s words. “No, they did not come to me.”

Kal nods and begins to turn to leave, but I can’t stop myself. How can I refrain from this opportunity? There’s so much knowledge now, here within my reach.

I blurt, “Can a soulmate tie be cut?”

“We’re done here,” Kal growls, pulling us away.

“Where were you when this Prince took you from your mate?”

Kal barks, “Don’t answer him.”

As the elf grows irritated, I hear cracking and see my breath in front of me. The room starts to freeze around us, ice creeping over the surfaces, crackling over the door. Min whimpers.

Kal obviously does not want me to give any more information to this Seer, but I have to know my answer. “In an open starlight courtyard!”

Ice spreads on every surface around us, gathering closer and closer to our feet like a bucket has been spilled in our direction. “No is your answer,” the elf says to me, giving me the truth. He turns to Kal. “And do not come again if you do not wish to pay, faerie!”

The ice reaches the toes of my boots just as we squeeze away.

We are back on the dunes, for a second. Then we are squeezed again.

We are in a grassy field, for a blink. Squeezed again.

Aster! ASTER!

I look around when I can stand to open my eyes. We are in a grove of orange trees. I feel like I am still spinning from the sifting. Dawn is approaching as Kal grabs oranges, handing a piece of fruit to each of us, but he instructs by example to hold our hands out flat. With a wave, the skin separates into two neat identical orange-skin bowls, exposing the meat, cut clean as if with the sharpest of knives. Another wave, and the orange-skin bowls hold cool water.

“The seer—” I start. We are still out of breath. Or at least I am.

“Uses information to see, a true answer for a true answer. He pieces the world together that way, gathers secrets. I didn’t want to give him mine. And...” Kal waits for me to look at him. His eyes are affirming, resolute, “We didn’t need the answer to your question.”

I look away.

He is clearly disappointed. Because he already told me I was enough for him. Surely he can understand my motive, though, to give myself to him fully? Someday, if I can even trust him again...

Or does Kal think I should be able to overcome the tie with Aster by the power of my affection for him, no cutting required? I don't know. I don't know anything anymore.

"Where are we?" I finally ask when the nausea subsides.

"Baltan."

"We already crossed the sea?" He just nods.

Blast me.

Kal at full strength is clearly something to behold. I think back to the river crossing. He had looked like a god, pure strength and courage and honor—and that was with seven poisoned arrow holes and a magic sword to the shoulder.

I feel a wave of admiration and then confusion. Everything is a jumble now. And I don't want to think through my feelings with him as witness. I focus on the taste of the orange, the coolness of the breeze.

"Three more jumps. We'll rest here a minute for your bodies."

Our bodies but not his.

Mighty Kalamaeus.

The Soul Prince.

I review my pitiful life.

Weeks ago, I was cursing the skies hoping to stay a grimy barmaid forever. How did I end up with my heart

intertwined with not one, but two faerie princes? I chuckle out loud involuntarily. Kal looks at me, thoroughly surprised. But I decide to cling to anger.

Anger is an old, faithful choice.

I am furious that Kal can feel me being furious. Yes, he's saved me over and over. But he's also been silent and mysterious. Then he captured my heart only to reveal—surprise—he is a lie. Not a star sentry. Not a lowly guard assigned to a lowly human.

Lowly human.

Anger is a gift that keeps on giving. I embrace the feeling. Kal physically moves away from me, his face contorted. I wonder if it feels to him like it does to me, like I am on fire and he is too close to the flame.

I am burning. With rage and heartache. Just a lowly human whose life and soul are being tugged back and forth by these faeries and their ways. And their horrible torture table. So that they can use my womb to make babies for them.

Do the fae desperately need babies who can dance?

I laugh again.

But thought of babies makes me think of Mother and home and all manner of very sad things.

Kal walks back towards me, his eyes searching mine, but I back up a step.

“Why?” I whisper. “Why didn't you tell me? Tell us who you are?”

His wings sag, and his chest falls. “I planned to, after I was sure you wouldn’t be scared. I almost did the night you asked about me...but we were barely friends yet, we...I wanted to wait for some hope that...that you wouldn’t hate me for it.”

I turn away, again. I don’t hate Kal, but *stars*, this is a serious deception, a serious intrusion. He is not himself but also, his relationship to me, to us, is not what I thought. He can see inside all of us, while we can see almost nothing of him. What I thought I knew of him is gone now.

Which makes me sadder still, to have lost him. Lost him in a jungle of lies and abuse that is much bigger than the two of us. A web of vines and sand pits and poison stretching back to the first birthing center, the first fate table.

He felt like safety, like home, and now he is gone.

And Raetown will soon be gone too. How quickly I forget my entire mission, to raise up the humans I left below. To change the laws, the very way of things. At least in Connestell. My mind left me along our journey, my aching feet and breaking heart distracting me from my mandate.

So weak, Jaylyn. In addition to all the turmoil and emotion, I am deeply disappointed in myself. But instead of weeping I stretch my body and focus on my muscles. I cling to the physical, the mental, not the emotional. Soon Kal, without looking too long at me, says it is time to sift again.

Can I take many more harrowing leaps?

CHAPTER 36

ASTER RALLEN. YOU ARE MINE AND I AM YOURS.

My soul's cry knocks me down. When we land, I have to drop to my knees. Kal squats down instantly, but I shrug him off and stand without his help. The final jump has landed us by a lake glittering in early morning sun. We are in a valley, with mountains looming on one side and fields stretching on the other. In front of us sits a stone house similar to a human governor's mansion. Kal starts walking towards it, and we follow.

The stab of grief in my chest hit me harder just now than in weeks of journeying. I feel longing in my sternum and in my core, even after trying to focus on my surroundings. I can even smell Aster's vanilla scent. I can almost hear his voice saying my name. Thoughts of his mouth and his arms burst into my brain without my permission. I have to shake myself out of it, repeatedly. The shot of desire makes me wonder if Aster might be nearby.

"How do you know no one is in there?" I whisper to Kal as we near the building.

"I'd sense them. And the house is mine, heavily warded, invisible from above," he explains.

I slow. Of course he would feel anyone. If Aster comes... Kal will feel him coming. Do I want Aster to come? No. Yes.

No, not yet.

But I don't want to blindly follow Kal around anymore, either.

I need to think.

The stone house is a small castle with no watch towers. Kal gives the heavy front door a shove and ushers us in. With a wave of his hand, all the starlight chandeliers and lanterns light up. We are in an entryway, with a large sitting room off to one side and a dining room on the other, a wide hall way stretching ahead of us.

Min stares up at Kal, worried. "You are like me, Kal. They will kill you. You must hide, brave, strong Mighty Kalamaeus. Are we to hide here? Certainly, we are? Please, my Prince."

"Min," he says with a full, heart-crushing smile, "there's a surprise here for you. Go look in that second door." He looks sneaky.

Who is this male? A sneaky surprise? A smile? I am beyond intrigued. She walks ahead, and her eyes sparkle as she looks back over her shoulder at us. She opens the door and squeals. I can hear water running.

"Oh, a bathing tub! Aha! A lovely big tub!" She runs out and hops, flying into Kal's embrace. Their laughing is infectious. "Oh, I'd almost forgotten the wonder of a bath! Prince Kal, so kind!"

"Go," he orders. She goes. "There's one for you too, Goody. Come." Kal leads the old male slowly down the hall to the third door.

"Good day? Good day."

After Goody is situated, Kal walks back to me, stalled in the entry. I can't seem to move. I am trying not to feel. He

leans in very close to whisper in my ear but doesn't touch me.

"I'm going fly a perimeter. I will be high enough not to feel you." He kisses me softly on the cheek near my ear before ducking out the door.

I collapse on the floor, opening the gate for every feeling and thought to flood me, drown me.

Is this what it is to be fae? Constant terror? Is anything real, ever?

I trusted Kal. Kal, not only the prince of darkness, but a half-blood. If discovered, he will be tortured and killed. If his monster of a father catches up with us, he'll be dead. Dead by some brutal mental game of pure agony. My heart hurts at the thought of that.

My heart also feels Aster's tug with new strength. What does this mean? Is Aster hurt, so my soul senses something amiss? Is he crying out my name somewhere? He could be hunting for me. I am his, he said. The Seer said the same. Maybe Aster is filled with fury, barreling after us step by step. He could have stormed the dungeons, then the forest. He could be at the Soul Palace now, demanding to know where we went next.

Zellis. Revolting Zellis. He said Aster was preparing for war. And the battle, the graglins, home. Arian is dead.

Wait, Arian is dead!

Aster is the king.

My soulmate is the Star King. Out of habit, I think to myself, "Just wait until Welton hears this!"

Welton. I replay the vision Zellis cast across the dining table. Welton and everyone else will be dead soon. Again, I have to shut off my heart and focus my mind. We have to plan, we must find a way to warn them, to save them. Knowing the graglin horror that is coming, I can't just hide out here.

Kal is so powerful, unbelievably so. But is he powerful enough to thwart his father's plans? Can he do it without being discovered or captured? I hate the thought of him even risking it.

Just hours ago, I was going to tell Kal I choose him. That he is more than enough for me. But this *Aster, Aster, Aster* overtaking my senses, coursing anew through my being—can I ignore it?

I care for Kal, and the reality is, he will know. My savior, my friend...he will notice my stab of grief every single time. To protect him, I will have to work to hide it all, all day every day. Me, hide my emotions. I almost laugh out loud at the ceiling of the entry way above me.

I cannot do it. Hiding emotions is tiring. Pushing out emotions is beyond difficult. I can't possibly try to hide this jarring tug over and over again, all day long, for eternity.

I stand, feeling the need to move, to pace, something. Anything. I stretch and breathe, focusing on my feet. I sing Welton's song in my head, spinning from the entry into the sitting room. I brace myself on the back of a chair and lift my leg. I bow low and turn again. The sunlight streaming through the window feels warm and happy. I leap a small leap in the space I have and land up against the window.

Looking out, my breath leaves me.

Behind the back of the house is a giant rolling field of bright pippy flowers in a million shades. They blow in the wind and shine in the sun. My eyes water at how they absolutely do look like little dancers. Thousands of little dancers in every color.

I think of Aster's kindness when I had been so scared...

I had been so scared.

And Kal felt it outside my door...

Every time I grew to starving.

When I started to weep.

Kal felt me.

It was Kal.

Silent Kal left the flowers.

Frozen Kal fed me over and over.

Unfeeling Kal gave me the gift of music in that envelope.

It was always Kal.

He had to feel me join with Aster.

Even after that, Kal wrote the note, telling me I could live through the ceremony.

That I must live.

Because he wanted me to live.

I am already running out of the house. My heart is splitting into a million pieces with each step. I have hurt him over and over; this wonderful creature, and he has been so patient. So gentle with me.

He's basically felt every miserable thought pass through my head and cared for me anyway. I run out the front door with abandon out into the clearing, knowing he will see me eventually. I search the blue sky, panting, until I spot him gliding down. I resume my running. He dives faster.

"What is it? What?" He lands in a run to me, concerned. I am completely overcome with every emotion I know, and he can sense them all. I double over, my hands on my knees, gasping.

I sob, "It was you."

"What?" He puts his hands on my arms, searching my face, trying to figure out what is happening.

"It was you who left the flowers. The music. The note. It was you," I am crying so hard now. He wraps his arms and wings around me and kisses my head. "It was you."

"You're so sad," he eventually says. It's a question.

"Because I was so oblivious for so long, I hurt you, called you horrible things, pushed you away while you..."

He strokes my head.

I look up at him, square into his eyes. "I choose you. I choose you." He lets out a garbled sound as he gathers me up and falls to his knees, like he can't bear to stand anymore. I straddle my legs over him and take his face in my hands, his gorgeous face that is tight with emotions. Maybe I can't feel them, but I know they are there.

I kiss his mouth softly, his cheek, his forehead. I shower his face with kisses. I want to give him everything, all the happiness, all the warmth I can.

But can I give him everything? A stab of sadness and guilt resurfaces. He deserves better.

“What?” he whispers. He feels the wave of grief and isn’t going to let it slide past. I rest my hands on his shoulders and sigh, starting to shake my head at the thought.

“You say I’m enough, but you just felt it. You’ve felt it over and over. I have this tie I can’t cut, this bond. And...you’ll know! Kal, you’ll know every time it pulls at me!”

“I’ll ignore it.”

“You can’t! It’ll stab you every time, over and over...I want to give you everything, but I physically can’t do it. It’s not fair to you. It’s not enough.”

“It is. It is.” Now he is showering me, slow kisses all over my face, reassuring. “We’ll figure it out.”

“What if he comes for me? What if I can’t resist him?”

He stills and then growls the words low and sure. “He is no match for me.” The statement is so guttural and threatening, it sends a chill down my spine.

“Are we going to hide here, then? Live in this valley?” Panic settles in as I remember the graglin armies. We cannot just stay away from everything and everyone.

“Jay. You’re safe.”

“But what of my family? My friends? All about to be ripped limb from limb by your father’s graglins? You’re just going to keep us here, hide until it’s over?”

He grimaces and pulls away from me. He sits back on his heels, and his shoulders sag.

“What?” I scoot forward to him on my knees. He doesn’t answer me. “Kal, this isn’t fair. You have to tell me what *you’re* feeling.”

“So little faith.” He pauses, considering. “In the prison, you really thought I was about to kill Min. I could barely feel down there, with all the wards, and still, I sensed your dread.”

“Well, it looked like it! And it would’ve been a mercy to them,” I yell. How could I possibly know anything in his mind, honestly?

“You thought I could *kill* Min? Our *friend*?” His tone cuts me a bit. This isn’t fair, this one-sidedness. Which makes me angry.

“Well, how, under the stupid sky above, would I *ever* know what you would and wouldn’t do? You never reveal anything, feel anything, you never say anything!” I unleash my thoughts, relieved to get them out. He is maddening.

“What would you have me say?”

“*Anything!* Say anything, Kal, for stars sake! You never give away a single thought. Ugh, truly, just a big bleeding stone statue! At least I *have* feelings.” He sits just breathing, watching me.

I stand and turn to go back to the house. He stands but he doesn’t follow. If he isn’t going to share with me, then I don’t want to be close to him, communicating every fleeting thought I have. It is too unfair.

“Shock,” he calls to me.

I stop and turn back. “What?”

“Shock. When I first saw you come out of that room. Your emotions were so strong...but your green eyes...I had to force myself to look away.” I don’t remember him looking at me at all.

“Agony.” He goes on. I look up at his contorted brow. “To not talk to you, smile at you. To feel your loneliness but I couldn’t...Please, understand, it took ages to work my way into the palace, I didn’t want to risk it all when...” He lets his words die in defeat. “When you wanted someone else.”

I walk to him and grab his hands, but he shakes free.

“Rage, Jaylyn. Maddening rage that you were *with* him in there. It makes no sense how angry I was. I almost lost it all. I almost crushed the door and threw lightning into his heart. I knocked the second he was through, lying about a problem to get him to leave. And then I was disgusted at myself that I did that to you, left you alone and couldn’t comfort you.”

I am stunned to silence, crying and listening. I had no idea. I wait, letting him pace back and forth, huffing, thinking. It is more words than I’ve ever heard him say, but they are tight, deliberate. I let him take his time.

“I was disgusted again that I let them turn you, because I couldn’t bear the thought of you dead...I was so weak. To let it happen. Your agony on the table...I vomited in my mouth twice. I’d rather be stabbed with a sword...then I was so proud you had listened. You let the magic in. That was the shortest ceremony I’ve ever seen. You absorbed it all, so brave.” He says it with awe but doesn’t turn to me. He looks off into the distance, remembering.

“When the turning was over, I could feel...your *need* for him. That was...that was what broke me. I left my post. I didn’t care if I’d be demoted or thrown in shackles, I had to get away. But I heard the screaming, the attack. I needed to be sure you were safe. I went back to the auditorium and followed just in time...Jay. He *left* you there.” He fists his hands and walks over to me. “That bastard had the sun, moon, and stars in his hand, and he let go. I didn’t care then, I had to be near you. Stay with you. Then we were caught by my father’s soldiers.”

He grabs my hands and fights to get the words out. “You were so angry. I could feel I disgusted you...I was finally with you, only for you to hate me. I didn’t know what to do or say, so I just gave you space, but I couldn’t stay away, so I tried to...be a friend. To train you. Show you your own strength. You stopped hating me, and it was the happiest I’d ever felt in my life.”

I reached up and put my hands on his face just as he kisses me. He gently pushes his tongue into me, searching my mouth with his. His kiss is an apology, a declaration, a plea. I am completely happy for a second but then thoroughly ruined with guilt and anger and sadness. I can’t fathom this. He pulls away to kiss my forehead.

“I didn’t...I had no idea, Kal.”

“I know...I have had to excel at hiding myself.” He takes my face in his hands. He kisses me tenderly.

But tenderness is not what I want.

I think of every loving thing he’s done, all the pain he’s just shared. All of it makes me insane with affection for him. I want him, and I want him to feel loved. Immediately.

I grab his hair and open myself up to him. Then my tongue does the pleading. He pulls me in and answers my passion with his own. I pull away and look up at him from under my lashes, heavy with desire. “Can you feel what I want now?”

He groans and closes his eyes. But he pulls back, with difficulty, and he strokes my cheek with his thumb. “Still too sad. Too confused.”

“I am *not* confused.”

He pulls me into him, from head to toe, gripping my backside. My toes curl in my shoes at how he has command of me. His voice is low and cracking as he whispers in my ear. “When I take you, as I’ve dreamt of every day,” his words are slow and thoughtful, “it will be only desire and joy. I want you to scream from pleasure and cry from happiness.”

I melt. I shudder and grow hot in my core, letting out a moan of my own.

He pulls away with a smirk and adds, “Also I don’t want to be within range of our two very old, very happy friends inside that house.” He wags his eyebrows at me like a fool, and I laugh. Hard. He laughs too. He kisses my forehead and takes my hand to start the walk back to the house.

He shifts to our commander, and his smile fades as he says, “I think I have another plan.”

CHAPTER 37

We open the door to the cottage and inhale the aroma of Min cooking something delicious. Kal takes me by the hand through the dining room to the kitchen. There we find her flitting around a stove, humming.

“Oh, look how lovely and clean and beautiful I am! Such a lovely bath, just look at me!” She has found fabric to make herself and Goody proper clothes.

“Indeed,” Kal says to her with a smile, squeezing my hand as he says it.

Goody is sitting at a table on the side wall of the kitchen. “Good day! Good day!”

“You look quite handsome yourself, Goody!” I tell him.

“Mighty Kalamaeus, I am making a soup for you. So delicious, you’ll see.”

“Mighty Kalamaeus?” I repeat to him. I am extremely curious and confused, which he knows.

“Yes! The warrior prince of the Soul! So brave, so strong. My savior Kalamaeus. Our Prince.”

I roll my eyes at Min and continue staring daggers at said prince. He looks smug, but it is time for him to do some more talking. I hold my ground.

“It’s true, I was quite the fighter,” he finally offers.

“And the general, the leader of leaders! He was! The commander and fierce warrior prince.”

Kal doesn't start talking, so I throw the feeling of frustration at him as hard as I can. He sighs.

"Min's story is true, except for the part about the elven lady. From what I know, in a family of lies and manipulation, my father fell for Lady Kalayna of the Stars, a fae member of the court. They were together in secret and had me. Father took me in, claiming I was the bastard of a high lady of his own court, which was easy to believe. Zellis's mother died in childbirth, and kings often have a host of ladies available to..." He clears his throat, and all of us look away. He goes on. "Of course, they were discovered, and Arian sentenced her to death." Kal's thumb strokes back and forth across my hand as he talks. He pauses, but I squeeze his calloused fingers to encourage him to go on.

"Father pleaded with Arian, and the High Council, but they refused, keeping Kalayna from him. They killed her but left Father alone because he was too powerful to get close to. He can control the minds of many at a time without touching, too difficult to kill." He crosses the kitchen and sits next to Goody at the table, and I join across from them. He sighs again, as if simply speaking is more difficult than blasting death rays from his hands.

"Father used to be just, kind, wise. He loved me once. But when I was around fifty years old, I could sense him changing. Our powers block each other and intermingle. Zellis's too. It is confusing, so we try not to read each other. But I sensed that when Father looked at me, instead of love for mother, he only felt rage and bitterness. And fear that his half-breed son would overpower him. I feared he would kill me, so I told Zellis I had a surveillance mission and fled." Min hums along to this tale and repeats Kal's words

here and there for emphasis. It is annoying but also adorable.

I can tell sharing is not easy for Kal. His sentences are clipped and awkward. He waves us each a glass of wine and takes a drink as if he is finished speaking. Awkward or not, he is sorely mistaken.

“And *then*?” I push.

“Then I roamed the countryside, testing my powers. I had kept everything hidden from everyone, even Father, for so long. I went through each kingdom, just to learn their ways. I used my soul powers to conceal myself. But it is difficult to hold all my powers in for long periods. Eventually I ended up in Connestell because I could become a sentry and work on my star powers—the ones I’d suppressed the most.”

“So...not a spy.” I tilt my head as he shakes his.

“I went back to check in a few times. It was terrifying to see how Father had changed. But I never thought his ambition and hatred would push him this far. Try to kill Arian, maybe, but not take out a whole kingdom.”

“You said you worked your way up in the palace?”

Another sigh. He can sigh all he wants—he is going to tell me everything.

“Yes, I heard more and more rumors of war. And of starlight outages. But I didn’t want to return home to try and stop Father until I knew more. So I worked my way up as a sentry to gain information. The Queen Mother and her ladies held back nothing in their gossip. My post was

invaluable,” he grins at me, “until a green-eyed dancer came and ruined it.”

I flush.

“Now. I think I have a plan—”

“Wait. Min said every kingdom has a fate table...” I don’t want to ask but I have to. “Did you...?” He reaches across the table and grabs my hand, cutting off my thoughts.

“Father never allowed our lords to use the table. He despises humans too much, even to the detriment of the Soul race.” Huge relief fills me, my chest expanding, which causes a pang in my soul. *Aster!* Guilt and frustration follow. Kal squeezes my hand and changes the subject.

“Zellis. He *is* a mind reader, and a painter.”

“Not real. Not real!” Min sings from her pot.

“Right, Min. He can see inside to your thoughts and read them like a book, hear them like you’re speaking. Or see what you’re imagining at that moment.”

“Blast.” A shiver runs over me. “Why does your family hate humans so much?”

Kal sits thoughtful. “I don’t believe it’s hatred but rather pride. He, and many other fae, just believe that this is the way of things. The fae rule at the top of the chain of power and humans serve as slaves at the bottom.”

“Unless they want to mate with us.”

“The table was based on the theory that the fae were dying out because the star was dying, and in turn, the more fae that die off, the weaker the star becomes...I think now, with the outages, the theory is proving correct.”

“Well, ripping humans from their lives to turn them into breeders doesn’t seem to have fixed it!” He doesn’t say anything, and I have to ask. “Did you know? About the breeding centers?”

“No. I didn’t.” He holds my gaze.

“What about the Fallows. Have you seen it?”

“The what?”

“When humans are too ill or old to work, they’re sent to the Fallows, a desolate area beyond the cities, without towns, no running water or starlight, but camps, villages. A place to be unproductive, to rest and die free and in peace alongside other elderly humans. You’ve never been there?”

He takes a deep breath, shaking his head. His voice is low. “I didn’t...know how bad species relations had gotten. The thought of that...of you, in a center.” He shudders slightly. “It wasn’t always this way. We used to protect humans, care for them, and they appreciated us in return. There was peace and respect. Until the magic started to wane and fae babies became more and more rare.”

“Well, maybe the fae should’ve just died out,” I snap and hate myself the moment the words are out. All three of them look shocked and sad, and Kal looks ashamed too. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean it!”

“We know.” Kal saves me by continuing. “Zellis’s power—he can read without touching.”

“Kal, did he read me?” I ask with a start. If he did, Kal’s secret is already known.

“No, there are so many wards in the main rooms of the palace, he would’ve had to touch you. And I’ve been warding you three against him.”

“Warding?”

“Using the magic around you—and my mind manipulation—to seal your head so that if someone tries to look inside your mind, they can’t make anything out.”

“When did you do that?”

“In the forest. While you slept.”

I give him a glare. “Please, from now on, no more secrets, Kal. You have to tell us. *Ask us.*”

“Now you know everything.” His eyes plead with me. “I’m sorry.”

I take a deep breath, hoping he can feel that I forgive him. For all of it.

“Okay, so, your plan?”

“My brother and I—we have a connection, even when warded against each other. He tries to get in, and it leaves an opening. I’m sure he sees some of my thoughts, but he leaves bits of himself behind. I sensed something in Connestell, a shield or sword or some object that they’re using to control the graglins. I need to find it and destroy it...and confront my father.”

“Do you think you can change his mind? Stop him?”

“No.” A heaviness settles over us again.

“Good day.” Kal only gives Goody a firm nod in response. I sit for a minute, trying to think through what he is saying,

what would be next.

“You sure as sky above better not be planning to go do this alone and leave us here, Kal.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t want you out of range from me. Ever.” Joy and warmth and desire wash over me under his protective stare. He squeezes my hand again just as Min serves us her soup.

“So we go to Raelus! So exciting! I have never been to Connestell. Oh, but I am! I am in Connestell! Ha! Oh, Goody, can you even believe it? And we got to take hot baths!” Goody is already busy eating.

Before I can throw another question at him, all the lights in the house go out. A hum—the ever-present starlight hum found anywhere there are lamps and lanterns—goes silent. We look to Kal, and he sits for a moment before shooting a small spark of light up into the chandelier overhead. The house flickers, so he does it again. The hum returns, and the lights stay on.

“Please, please, *please* will you explain to me what is going on with the starlight?”

“I don’t know.”

“But how does it even work? I tried to follow your discussion at the palace, but my mind was so slow in there.”

Kal swallows and then sets down his spoon. “Starlight fae can connect to starlight, all light. Ancient fae found shallow spots on the surface of the planet where they could draw out Loya’s power. They built Connestell around them. They pull the light up and catch it, storing it for use in lamps, pumps, engines. It powers most of our magic.”

“So, no starlight, no magic?” I ask Kal gracelessly in between bites. The soup is divine. Min can sing Kal’s praises all she wants, if she will keep cooking.

“Much, much less. No more floating cities, no sifting, no charged weapons. Magic takes energy.”

“And no powers either?”

“Probably not.”

I sit back in my seat at the seriousness of this. “So the star is running out of light?”

“It shouldn’t be. We create energy too, with our magic, and it gets absorbed back into the planet. Or it always has, until now.”

“Is your father’s object related to the starlight?”

“It would make sense. If the object I sensed is drawing too much magic from the star to control the graglins, and we aren’t creating enough energy in return, power will fail.”

We sit for a moment in worried silence. I decide to focus on a plan rather than our entire planet’s probable demise. “How are you going to find it?”

“I could make out that it is in a cave. The graglins come up from underground, logical that he’d have it near his troops.”

“A cave!” I squeak. “That’s it? Aren’t there, say, one *million* caves across the kingdom?”

He points to himself with his spoon. “Warrior Prince. There are only a few good places to launch a ground assault.”

“And your”—I clear my throat—“extremely beautiful friends we just met? Are they coming as well?” I hate how silly and jealous I sound, but I can’t stop myself.

“No. They wouldn’t challenge the crown directly, for fear of my father or brother killing their father.”

“How did you meet them?”

He sighs, exasperated. “So many questions.”

I scoff. “Well, excuse me if I’m still trying to accept that my handsome, quiet, lowly sentry savior is actually a secret half-blood, mind-reading, lightning-throwing mighty warrior spy prince!” He winces but also smirks, clearly pleased about the handsome part. “Now, how do you know Leto and Lana?”

“We grew up together.” He is not forthcoming—I think purposefully so. I am starting to simmer like Min’s stew. “And Lana?” He won’t look at me.

“There was...flirtation when we were young. Nothing serious.” The simmer is turning to a boil. I’ve never even thought of him with others. But he is a prince. Of course, there have been others. It’s obvious just to look at him, pure strength and valor in a being. Who knows how many, where, when...

“How *old* are you?”

“Around four hundred.” My stomach flips.

My mouth hangs open for a beat until I think to ask again. “Min? How old are you?”

“I think two hundred and fifty?”

“Just a wee sprite.” Kal winks at her, but I think he is surprised too. She looks centuries older than Kal. Almost as old as Goody. It must be because of the years she spent in shackles without sunlight.

All fae look to be about thirty for centuries, so it is impossible to know their true age. But. Four hundred! There must have been so many females! And yet, he’s never married. That I know of. I am about to ask more, but he turns to praise Min for her soup.

Blast, I’ve made things tense again.

I join in on the compliments, and we let Min jabber. She rants on and on about her excitement over Raelus, her intense distaste for Zellis, and her confidence Kal will have no trouble defeating his father and saving the world. We laugh together, feeling the weight of our journey shake free for a moment.

I stand with my bowl to clear my plate in a very human non-magical way, and a thought strikes me. “Kal, all your powers...what else can you do?” He looks over to me and instantly Min vanishes. Shock causes me to drop my plate. It shatters on the ground just as she reappears. Kal is gone.

“Good day! Good day!” Kal is back, and Goody has vanished.

“Light bending,” Kal explains. With an annoying grin he adds, “Another reason I’m allowing you all to join me tomorrow.” I steady my breath, roll my eyes at him, and let out a laugh of relief. I look down at my boots, covered in the last dregs of soup and shattered porcelain.

“Ugh, Min can you—”

“No,” Kal cuts me off. “You can do it. Imagine it as it was and snap it back together.” I get it after a couple tries, to much cheering. It is cracked and messy, but it stays together. When Min settles, Kal clears his throat.

“May I please show you all something?” It is such a strange, tender question from our commander.

Min loses her mind saying yes for all of us. “Of course, we want to see anything and everything you have to show us, powerful, Mighty Kalamaeus!”

He stands and leaves the kitchen, and we follow. In the entry, he waves away all the furniture in the sitting room. I will have to ask him to explain that to me later. Are they on the roof? But for now, I watch him. He gestures for us to join him by the front door.

“I meant to say, ‘Jay, will you show us something?’” As he says it, a scene fills the entry way, as it did at Zellis’s table. This is not as clear as Zellis’s image, but much bigger. It takes a moment to come into focus.

It’s the orchestra. From Eridia’s ball, waiting to start “The Hobbit’s Cry,” just as I remember it. I blink a few times in disbelief. Kal takes over our senses so we can also hear the sounds of the ballroom as well as see the orchestra with our eyes. I gape up at his beaming face.

“Will you dance for us?”

I nod and take my place in the cleared space, to Min’s cheers.

And I dance. I fill the whole sitting room with my moves, just as I did at the ball. When I finish, Min explodes with joy and praise and words, and Goody cries.

After the illusion fades, I run up and embrace Kal, kissing him firmly on the mouth.

I burrow into his neck and smile into his warm skin, “Thank you!”

When I pull away, he holds my gaze and pauses thoughtfully. “That’s my favorite feeling. Feeling you feel that way.”

Min and Goody have already started walking down the hall. Min is telling Goody all about the *wondrous, marvelous* bed in her room.

“Good night!” I call to them without looking away from my prince, who I am about to cover with kisses. But even though I am filled with glee, my questions nag. Which annoys me. I annoy myself.

“What?” His voice is soft, calm, patient.

“Four hundred years, and you never married?” He just shakes his head no. “And have you...ever been in love?” I look down, nerves raging.

“There were...lovers. But no mate. None of them knew the truth about me.” He lifts my head. “No one was worth the risk...until you.”

The warmth in his words and his eyes, the deep scruff of his voice...they are enough to wipe any more questions from my mind. I look at his lips and make my desire as clear as possible in my mind.

He croaks. “We cannot share a bed. I can’t...control myself.”

“So don’t,” I say softly. I see I’m affecting him. He pulls me in his arms and kisses me hard, letting one hand roam to squeeze me wherever he pleases. I lean into him and kiss back as fiercely as I can.

He pulls away, grinning, a cruel tease. “It will be worth the wait.”

Unbelievable.

Insufferable.

With more kisses and heated looks, we part into our separate bedrooms. I bathe and clean my clothes before lying in bed, trying not to think. When I lie still, *Aster!Aster!Aster!* rolls through my thoughts uninvited. I try not to notice it. I try not to feel anything at all since Kal will be lying in the next room, knowing.

Which gets me frustrated that I can’t simply lie there and think.

And even more frustrated that we aren’t together in one room, in one bed, doing what I really want to be doing.

I focus on how exhausting the next few days will be for all of us, and eventually, sleep finds me.

But not before I think of something.

Something mad, to be sure, but something I need from my prince.

CHAPTER 38

A soft knock at the door wakes me with a stab. *ASTER ASTER!* I shoot up, grabbing my chest. Kal's arms are around me in an instant. He doesn't ask any questions, and I don't offer any explanation. He just holds me for a few minutes.

Softly he says, "Time to go."

I steady myself to ask him for my favor. "Can we make a stop first?"



ASTER ASTER ASTER!

We squeeze and pull our way through space and land standing in the trees outside of Raetown. It is my turn to sift us now, so I muster all my concentration. I am not completely sure I can do it, but I am sure I absolutely need to do it. I move my foot a hair forward, and in an instant, we are on the very back edge of the Whistler's small wooden stage.

Home.

It is almost dawn, so I expect the hall to be empty, long closed for the night. I am just going to leave Welton a quick note. But my eyes open to see the Whistler is alive and loud, totally overrun. With wounded.

Bloody men are on the tables, chairs, and floor. Even on the stage just in front of my feet. Not soldiers. So, graglins have made their way into town. Women and children are huddled, crying in corners. The familiar scent of ale and pipe smoke is clouded by the stench of blood and filth. Women and men I don't recognize move back and forth to help the wounded, fetch water, and assemble supplies.

I am frozen, blinking, processing what I see, wondering if anyone sees me. Kal is using his light bending to cloak himself, Min and Goody. So, I suppose I've just appeared from thin air. But in the mayhem no one even looks up. My heart surges when Welton comes around the corner with a pitcher of water.

"Welt!"

"Jay? Jay! When did you get here? What are you—"

I don't move, but my face pleads with my friend. "Welton. The boys. My family?"

"They're safe, they holed up in the lower levels of the factory."

"Father?"

"Left for battle."

I nod. "And you? You're all right?"

"Always..." His smile fades and he stares. He's likely starting to question my odd posture, standing still as a stone with one hand out in Kal's invisible grip. There is so much I want to say, but we have a mission, and I've learned what I need to know. The boys and Mother are alive, safe. Welton is safe.

“Well, uh, how about you go grab a gal some ale? I’m parched,” I say. He doesn’t want to walk away, but he knows something is off. He trusts me, giving a slight bow before walking back into the kitchen. I give Kal’s hand a squeeze, and he kisses my head before sifting us. I vanish from The Whistler, unsure I’ll see my best friend ever again.

With a pinch we are on a hillside overlooking a valley. Kal has narrowed down the few most likely caves near Raelus, and we are going to check them one by one.

The first crevice is deep, but even in the darkness, Kal will feel an army around him. He doesn’t. We jump again, to another hilltop. The deep valley is smaller this time. No one. We sift twice more, and I grow nauseated.

At the final peak, we look out over a ravine that is not nearly as deep as the others. Kal tenses. I can’t see anything or hear anyone below. He pulls us back from the crest and senses my confusion.

“It’s warded to make the minds around it see something else. They’re there. Thousands,” he whispers as he squeezes his temple with his free hand. His face holds a pained expression, and his breathing is ragged, labored. I squeeze his hand. What must it be like to sense the feelings of thousands of beings? How is he even standing?

“Disgust,” he mutters. “Hatred. Bloodlust. So much.”

Min pulls a cup from the house out of her new leather satchel. We each drink water and wait for Kal’s instructions.

His discomfort seems to fade after a few minutes. “There’s a cave on the east side. I will sift us to a crest

above it, then I will go below. Stay together, and do not move from where we land.”

The dawn is just arriving. I see no cave, but I trust his true fae eyesight more than my own. “But Kal,” I whisper in protest.

“I said within range of me, Jay, not with me all the way to death’s door. I will still feel you.”

I ripple with anger and fear. I don’t want to be away from him.

He takes my face in his hands and gives instructions. “I will be a sift’s breath away, but I will feel you. Try to keep as calm as you can.”

I nod, understanding. If I am fraught with shots of terror again and again, it will be hard for him to decipher true danger from my nagging emotions. It will also be harder for him to focus on the task at hand.

Our feet land on the opposite side of the valley, in a cluster of trees near a cliff. He turns and kisses me firmly, quickly, and then he is gone. I underestimated the loss of him, suddenly not protecting us anymore. *Clear your mind. Clear your mind.*

I focus all my might on my hearing, to the point of feeling my large new ears turn warm. I have to steady myself. What if this takes him hours? What if a sentry comes upon us—or a graglin?

Calm, Jaylyn. Kal will know. He will come. I focus on my long, deep breaths.

Then he is back, just moments later. I scan his form. He doesn't appear hurt. His eyes are wide, but he says nothing, just reaches for us. We know what he means, and with a squeeze, he lands us on a hilltop where we were earlier in the night.

Kal bends over, gasping. Min gets the water for him. He takes it and stands.

"We're too late. The battle's begun. That horde was just reinforcements." He gasps for air, and we stay silent, waiting for him to sort his thoughts. "I found the cave, but the device is gone. It left so much magic behind. Dark. Big... *huge* magic. I saw flashes of Father's mind." He turns to look at me, intense. "The device on a battlefield, the groves right underneath Raelus."

Bile rises in my gut. To be under the city, so near to Aster. I don't know how my body will respond. What if I go mad with longing and leave to find my mate? What if Aster senses my presence and comes right to me?

Would he try to kill Kal? Kal would kill him. If it comes to a fight between the two of them, which I absolutely do not want, there is no doubt. Kal will win. Easily. Dread and fear grab me by the throat. I focus all energy on steadying my breath.

"Kal, are you sure I should go with you?"

"The risk is greater if we're separated."

"And them?" I gesture to our friends, who seem to shrink with the scheme of what we are facing. They are so much stronger now, but Goody is still hunched and hobbling. Min can barely fly. She hangs her head but says nothing. It is

clear she feels like the liability she is, and that wounds me. Goody stands as straight as he can, looking straight ahead.

Our fearless friends.

“Good day. Good day.” His features are determined.

“I know you are a fighter,” Kal says back to him

“But they’ve no powers, and if you can’t cloak them...”

Kal cuts my worries off. “I will cloak them. And,” he says, turning to Goody, “if I take you both somewhere and tell you to stay there, you stay.” Goody seems to accept his orders. Min nods her head yes but is shaking with fear. She is clamping her mouth shut.

Kal gathers himself up to his full, towering height, readying himself—and us. We grab hands and he looks at me with unsettling intensity, even for him.

“Do not...Jay. Do *not* let go of my hand. If I have to fight, keep right behind me...” He pauses so I know exactly what he means. “Stay with me.”

I hope beyond hope that I will be able to.

CHAPTER 39

ASTER, Where are you? You are mine. I am yours. I should be with you. I want you. I need you. ASTER!

It hits me like a swift punch in the gut when we land. The strength of it overwhelms and disorients me. My whole body pulls tight as a drum. I grab at my chest, gasping and reach for Kal to keep from falling to the ground.

Kal holds me to his side and whispers in my ear. “Shhh. I have you. Breathe. Block it out. Shhh.” I keep gasping and try to focus on our surroundings. We are on the backside of a hill, not far from the heart of Raetown here below or from the very bottom point of Raelus above.

Whatever the device is, I can sense it now. It pulses out magic in strong waves. A rhythm. But it is nothing compared to the sounds of battle. The screams and smells are just like the palace courtyard in Raelus but much, much worse.

Above us, faerie fighters streak through the air, and their sparks with them. Most of them have at least one graglin on their body. It is a stark contrast, the beautiful, fair-skinned white-winged Star sentries with the black graglins—death—crawling all over them.

The smell of blood is so thick, I taste it. And the charring. The sentries’ sparks are burning everything. My ears pierce with ringing, and the hairs on my arm raise. Min holds her hands to her ears while Kal and Goody stand stiff. Resolute.

Kal searches my eyes to see if I am all right, and I give him a nod. *Aster, Aster, Aster* still pounds through me, but I am

not feeling the urge to run away. I still have control.

Kal motions for us to stay back. He hunches down into a squat and makes his way to the top of the hill so he can see what we can already hear. I am petrified. I cover my ears and try to focus on anything other than fear. I fail.

Kal comes back with his tanned face turned white. He grimaces and puts a hand to his head. I cannot fathom it, the horrific emotions he must be feeling all at once.

He is a marvel.

“I spotted my father. I’ll take us past him and approach him from behind.” We three are so overwhelmed by the nightmare we smell and hear that we don’t ask or protest. Kal gathers us, and we sift away.

We land on another close hillside, high on a cliff.

“He’s down below. I will jump from here.”

“You can’t just sift right to him?”

“He has wards around himself. Better to feel them out from behind before I strike.” He looks at me, and his voice is barely above a whisper. “Stay calm for me. Stay calm unless you need me.” He kisses me firmly again. I do not like these goodbye kisses. Before I’m ready to let go, he’s gone, jumped off the ledge.

It’s eerily quiet and still where we are. As the moments roll on, I can’t handle not seeing him. I need to know if he’s hurt or caught. I crawl to the edge to look. The scene is so intense I want to scrape my hand open on a rock. It would help me to focus on pain and not fear.

But I stop with my hand raised. Of course, Kal would sense my pain. I know sensations are different than emotions, but he somehow suffers from feeling them both. I focus on the rhythm the magic is making. Whatever the object, it puts out a pulse pattern that I can feel, like the stream that day when I leapt across.

Zaynr is below us on another big cliff that is wide and flat, but still well above the battlefield itself. He does not look as formidable as I expected. He is shorter than Kal, leaner like Zellis, with his wings sagging. I wonder if maybe he is extremely old, but I can't see his face to be sure.

He is looking out over the carnage, his back to Kal, surrounded by a formation of graglins. Like in the tavern hall, they make a C shape around Zaynr, who stands in the position of the tavern center stage. There are maybe a hundred of them guarding him. Too many. Kal has dropped straight down to the cliff face and is walking towards the scene.

None of the graglins move. They don't hear him or smell him? But Kal will have to walk through their formation to reach his father. As soon as he gets close to one, they all turn in unison. I cover my mouth's scream. Kal begins shredding through them. He holds two swords, which he crosses to sever one head after another from the bodies.

But he isn't using his light. He could take a few down easily with a few strikes. He could circle above and kill them all before setting foot on the ground.

Oh. Then his father would see his mighty starpower in action. Others in battle would recognize him as the Soul Prince and see his light and realize what he is. So Kal will

have to fight those beasts with just his swords. He is already making his way through the swarm, little by little.

I see now why they call him the warrior prince. He dodges two graglins and stabs another. He screams and crushes graglins heads into one another. He slices two at once with ease. He throws them down and smashes their heads with his feet.

I start adding music to the magical rhythm I feel in my head. Anything to keep from dissolving into my emotions. Where is it coming from, that rhythm? I need to help Kal find it.

I look out onto the battlefield to search for the source and immediately wish I hadn't. The image of battle will haunt me every time I close my eyes for the rest of my life.

There are dead men everywhere. The ground is littered with humans—human parts—and the graglins are still tearing them apart, even after they are down. The black creatures all move the same, tearing men limb from limb. Only when the body is disassembled do the creatures move on. They bite and claw so fiercely, the human fighters drop almost immediately after encountering one. The faeries above strike with lightning so much in the chaos, humans are being struck and scorched. One human goes down from a blast of light while the graglins around continue fighting.

I have to do something. I have to stop the creatures. The object, the rhythm—where is the source? It seems to be coming from Zaynr himself, but I can't see if he is holding a sword. It doesn't look like it from my angle above.

Kal has made progress, but the beasts tear at him, jumping all over him, trying to get a hold to pull at his

limbs. I see a small spark. Tiny, but there. He is using his light now. Small blasts at the close graglins, to keep them from biting or grabbing on. He shoots small bursts through his swords as well. Hopefully his father can't see what he is doing.

His father...he remains looking out over the battlefield. He hasn't turned at all. Does he even know Kal is there? It is bizarre how still he is.

Kal starts using more lightning on the graglins as he nears Zaynr. I see why.

Kal has bite marks all over. He's being ripped to shreds even though he is still standing. Finally, he takes down the last dozen graglins with one big strike of lightning. I pray to Creator no one close by on the battlefield saw.

I hold Min's hand beside me, where she and Goody have crawled to watch. We all tense as Kal approaches Zaynr from behind. This is it. Kal against the most powerful faerie king of the ages, his own father.

KALAMAEUS

Blast, this is painful. I am bleeding badly now and can feel my power, my connection to the magic around me, the light under my feet, waning.

Creator above, if you are to take me now, let it be swift.

Because she is distraught. Her watching me, her spike of terror with my every step, it's worse than the bites, the

stabs and scratches. And I can't ease her suffering. I can't hold her, comfort her.

There's nothing I can do except move quickly. And yet my steps are labored, my arm like a boulder as I try to raise it.

To touch my father.

I can sense already he's not the same king I left behind. But I cannot be sure what terror awaits when I grasp his shoulder. Does he know about Jay? Will he make her mind sense pain, push me to madness? It's possible even with his age that he's grown in power. Maybe he will paint my mind with images of her death.

No matter his strategy, it will mean agony for me and shackles for him. I must put an end to this. There is no other way.

Now, Kal, simply do it!

I reach out and touch him, steadying myself for a horror.

But instead, it's...confusion.

There's an urgency—he can sense me connecting with him.

Warmth, some remaining affection for me.

Heartbreak.

Stars above, it's too much sadness, even for me. Too bleak and painful. There is no joy in this feeling, just darkness.

Images now, blurred and chaotic.

Father on a tirade about hunting Arian down and killing him. Maps of Connestell, correspondence between High

Council members. All the makings of war and revenge. Zellis always by his side, but then...

Zellis and Father, at the table, but Zellis is painting torturous images. Me dead. The kingdom destroyed.

Torture. This is torture.

Zellis tortured Father.

Father sitting at a window, locked in his mind.

Zellis and the graglins. Zellis and a massive orb of light. More than one orb. Zellis hiding in the shadows while Father stands here on the battlefield.

The scenes change, faster now.

Mother.

Stars, she was beautiful.

His whole being fills with love for her. He shows me her laugh, her eyes wet with happy tears. The two of them dancing. The two of them holding me. Mother rocking me in a chair. Zellis and me, playing in the courtyard, Father laughing. The three of us hunting together.

Then mother again.

Every angle of her face, every feature in vivid detail, her hands, her smile, her holding Father's face in his hands. Her power, blinding and huge. Images of her throwing lightning larger than I've ever seen, laughing as she does it. Pride inside my father's heart as he watches her.

It is as though most of Father's soul is made of her. She is all his light, hope, honor, fight. The love I feel between them

is stronger than magic itself. Stronger even than the need for vengeance I feel underneath it all.

His rage.

It's consuming, so much that I see the images of her beauty darken at the edges. And I understand now, when I think of Jaylyn's smile, her joy, her fire, if someone were to snuff it out...take her from me...my fear and anger at the thought almost cuts my father's connection to my mind. I think my body shudders.

He pushes on, and I watch images of Mother.

I am so taken with her, so many sweet moments I'd forgotten, I don't feel what he's just done.

The idea is firmly planted now.

I try to fight it. I beg in my mind for him to release me, and I think we fall to our knees. But my body is already acting before my consciousness can block him out.

With love and sorrow and regret radiating at me, I throw lightning into my father's heart.

JAYLYN

They are in a standoff, each holding the other one's shoulder at arm's length, frozen.

My chest tightens, but they don't move. There is no struggle. It is too still. Something is very wrong, and I can no longer control my fear. I stand up and lean, looking for a spot of ground right near Kal. I need a patch of dirt a few paces from him, free of graglin remains.

This is stupid and risky, but I have to try. I let go of Min's hand and concentrate with all my strength. I take a small

step forward and sift to that spot. It works.

“Kal!”

He is starting to slump, and he pulls Zaynr down with him, as if the battle in their minds is raging as much as the one surrounding me. As they crash to the ground, Zaynr appears to be on top of Kal, overpowering him, but then I see the light. Kal throws his light up into his father’s heart for what feels like an eternity.

“Kal! Kal!” I scream as the light subsides. He starts to stand. He’s standing. He sways, sweats, curses, and almost falls again. But he’ll be alright. Surely, he is already healing.

He’s made it.

I am about to run to help hold him up, but my sight leaves me. I groan, familiar with this torture.

I feel a cold sword across my throat. I focus on staying still and calm. Kal will know what to do.

“So, not loyal after all, then.” Zellis.

“Let her go.” Kal is walking close to us now.

“You were always too weak for father’s vision.”

“Zellis. Let her go.”

“Her terror is remarkable.” Zellis breathes in at my neck. “No wonder you’ve kept her to play with, even tied to someone else.”

“Zellis, I’m warning you.” Kal is moving towards us.

Zellis spits each word, faster as Kal approaches. “Pity you didn’t bring her home to our table, brother. We could’ve dusted it off for such a creature. And you warded her from

me so well...what is she hiding, brother? What don't you want me to see inside your little pet?" He breathes in at my neck again. My body ripples with revulsion. Why won't Kal just strike him down?

Wait.

Zellis doesn't know. Panic swarms me like the graglins. Zellis cannot find out. We have to somehow get out of here without exposing Kal's secret.

"You've no sword, Kal. No guard. I've got your female, you're through."

Kal doesn't respond. Kal screams in pain, and I hear a shuffle.

"Kal!" I scream when I regain my sight just in time to see Kal stumble backward, covered in bites and scratches. Zellis, just pierced by Kal's sword, lurches forward and stabs Kal in the gut.

Zellis falls backward and disappears before hitting the ground. Kal falls to his knees, then to the ground. I rush to him, screaming. "No, no, no, no, no, no!"

His eyes are closed, but he croaks out to me, "Pull it out."

I sob, and my hands quake as I put my hands on the hilt of the sword.

"Pull it." He mouths the words, but no voice comes out. I brace against him with my left hand and yank the sword with my right. Blood streams out through the wound. It is instantly everywhere.

"Kal, Kal, Kal, Kal!"

"Jay."

“What do I do? What do I do!”

“Find it. The source.” I just blink at him. No. I can’t leave him. There is too much blood. I have to hold his wound.

Suddenly, somehow, thank Creator, Min and Goody sift next to us. Min moves my hands and places hers on his chest with her eyes closed. “Good day. Good day.” Goody is yelling, pointing behind me, Kal’s faithful lieutenant. I look back.

Killing Zaynr didn’t end the battle. Graglins are still under someone’s thrall, and now some of them are charging towards our ledge. I focus on the rhythm. The object must be with Zaynr, it must. Min’s hands are glowing on Kal’s chest as I stand. I don’t want to leave them, but I can hear the horde of graglins on their way.

I run to Zaynr’s body. But there is nothing in his hands. I try to turn him over, but he is too heavy. *Where is it? Where is it?*

I turn to look back at Kal. A group of graglins has piled on top of each other enough to scale themselves up the cliff face. Min is still working on Kal. They both look as white as ghosts and weak as ever. Goody stands tall, his stance firm and open, between the mounting graglins and Kal. They are almost to the top. I scream and brace myself to watch my sweet, old friend die.

But with a wave of his hand, Goody produces a massive wall of flame. The graglins slow and lose their grip. They don’t die, but many of them fall from the cliff face. Goody opens his arms and shapes the wall to form a circular boundary of flame around himself, Kal, and Min. He is still hunched and panting. I can see the power is costing him.

And the graglins are nearing the flame, touching it to test the boundary. I must hurry.

Focus on the rhythm. Focus!

I feel with my senses—it's right here. Somewhere. I search with my hands. Hovering over Zaynr. Wave, wave, wave. There! Tucked into his cloak, I feel it, something pulsing out the magic. I dig with my hands through his layers of cloak and feel a chain. The magic coursing through the chain burns my hands.

I pull away.

But as I do, I hear Goody moan. I look to check that his flames still burn. They do, but he is withering. I have to move faster.

I grab the burning chain again.

It's not a burn. The magic in the metal pierces me, knives of hot pain.

I scream with shock, but somehow, I keep digging. I pull and move the fabric until I find it. At the end of the chain is a glowing censer encasing a bright white-purple orb. It looks like trapped sparks, so bright that glancing at it hurts inside my eyes and behind them, into my skull. I dig to unhook the chain so I can get it free of Zaynr's waist. Graglins have almost reached me on the side of the cliff, in a new pile, climbing on top of each other to reach me on the ledge. Any second, they'll be on me.

The chain comes free. I feel the weight of it at the end of the length and adjust my grip. I am sobbing and screaming, but I can't even hear myself. Shards of magical torture

shoot up my arms through every muscle, every tendon. I swing the orb into the ground. It doesn't break.

Blast! Goody, Min, Kal—we're all going to be torn limb from limb.

Kal. I think of all the lessons he's given me for magic, for my powers. This is like the table. *Let it in. Clear my mind. Let it in.* I imagine myself opening up to the pain in my arms.

I let myself fill with pain.

I am sure my limbs are in flames. Maybe graglins are biting at me. Maybe they're pulling me apart right now. But I can't stop. I have to break this censer. I swing the chain a few times, feeling the magic, the pulse. I let it gain momentum, and I let myself succumb to agony at the strain. With a shattering scream that I'm sure will be my last, I fling the chain up and throw as hard as I can. This time I feel the pulse, and in the rhythm's short break, I swing the chain faster and harder, throwing the censer into the rocky ground.

The ball of sparks explodes a bomb of light and power in me, around me, and through my veins. Fire, glass, blades, coursing through my whole body. I am done. I fall numb with exhaustion after the power passes through. Distantly, as I fall, I know I have to get up, to run.

The graglins will overtake me. I try with everything in me, but my eyes won't open. My limbs won't move. I hear their growling and gargling. I feel one at my leg and I wait for a bite.

But there is no bite.

I try to inhale.

Honey and sweat.

Kal.

I am picked up and carried. What a way to die, in his arms. Kal's body all around me, my warm cradle, my guard, my friend. *My home.* It is the last thing I sense before the dark.

CHAPTER 40

ASTER, ASTER, ASTER, Where are you? I try to open my eyes, but they are like lead. Darkness overtakes me again and again.

At one point I see the roof of Kal's house in the pippy fields. Then black again.

ASTER! ASTER, PLEASE, ASTER! I open my eyes to make out Kal in my line of sight, crestfallen.

Blast. I've said Aster's name out loud. I try to open my mouth to say something, anything, but darkness covers me like a blanket.

A squeeze. A pull. Kal's scent. Min's voice.

Squeeze, pull, a warm breeze. Blackness.

Salt.

Honey.

Citrus.

Aster. It is only a whisper as I open my eyes. Thank Creator above. Confusion and fear help me wake up because I don't recognize the roof above me. Someone squeezes my hand.

"You're safe." Kal sits beside the bed, looking disheveled and worried. He is no longer covered in blood and is sitting upright, to my great relief. Before I even sense my own thirst, he hands me some water.

"We're on the southeast coast of Neymu." I exhale. We are literally as far as we can possibly get from Raelus and its

Prince. The tug in my chest is tolerable. What sweet, sweet relief.

I glance around the room. It is a bright, simple bedroom in a wooden house. Outside a bay of large windows, I can see swaying palm trees and the ocean beyond.

Kal knows what I am going to ask. “They’re both fine. Min has fussed over you to no end.”

“Goody, he—” Kal nods and smiles as he strokes my hair.

“Min told me.” I close my eyes, and my mind goes back to the battle. I can’t stop looking at the gore.

“All those humans, Kal—”

“You did it. The graglins fled back underground after the orb broke.”

“So it’s over?”

“You should keep resting.” Frustration. Irritation. He sighs and answers me. “It’s Zellis.” I don’t understand, so I wait. “When I got to father, his eyes were clouded, like the graglins. His mind was a scramble, but he recognized me, tried to let me in. Zellis has been manipulating, experimenting, torturing him. He’s been using the orbs, making the plans, all of it, with Father in mental chains, for decades.”

“But you killed Zellis.”

He shakes his head. “Only wounded him. He escaped. And he has another orb. The one you crushed was a link to a much bigger orb, the source of the power. I saw glimpses of him in a cavern with it. The power Father feared in his memory, the power I felt in Zellis’ mind, it was much bigger

than that censer could hold.” I look to his chest where the sword was lodged. And where there had been so much blood. “I’m fine. Min did well. Hardly a scar.”

So the war is not over. I can’t shake the images of humans being thrown, bitten, ripped apart just outside my town, my home.

“The battle...” I remember the screaming, the growling, the crunching of bones. The moaning. I start to shake again. “We have to stop it, Kal, the humans were...shredded, ripped like paper. Their arms, heads—”

“Shhh, I know. I know.” He moves to sit next to me on the bed and pulls me into his chest.

My voice cracks, “We have to stop it all, the slave labor, the Placement, the tables—”

“I know. We will. We will, Jay. But we need to regain our strength.”

“...have to get every human out from under a city shadow, Kal, every single one. Change the laws—”

The laws. Zellis was there on the battlefield. “Kal, did he see your light? When you killed Zaynr? If he knows what you are, he’ll be coming for you, hunting you and—”

“Shh...We’ll find him first.” He kisses my forehead firmly. He rubs up and down my back until I have calmed slightly. “Do you want to rest or eat?” Stars, I am famished. He is already getting off the bed before I have to answer.

“Wait, Kal. Your father...are you all right?”

He takes a breath, and his wings sag, “We...weren’t close. Those few moments were a gift. To see his mind so plainly.

But I lost him ages ago. I am all right." His voice and his stare turn to ice. "Zellis will not be."

I nod and stand, becoming aware of my clothing, clean and new. *I am clean.*

"Min. I didn't see....unfortunately." He is grinning. "I showed her your dancing dress." She has captured it beautifully. The pants connect to the shirt again, with flowing ribbons of fabric. I love it, and I don't have to say so. Kal leads me out into a hallway, and Min almost knocks me over, flitting into my arms.

"Oh, Jaylyn! Brave, mighty Jaylyn! You saved us! Two saviors now! So strong. And all that power you held! Three days you were in sleep, three days! It was far too long."

"And you? You saved Kal! How did you sift in? How did you get your powers? I want to hear everything." I walk a couple steps to give Goody a big hug. He looks better than I've ever seen him. They all do. "And you, old trickster! You saved us as well!" He puts one hand on each shoulder, looks me square in the eye, intense, smiling his toothless smile, and says slowly, "Good day. Good day."

We all chuckle in response, and I duck my head, sure he's praising me.

The house is similar to the pippy field manor but much brighter. The thatching and wood and stone all have a white sheen to them, as if the house has stood, warring against the sand and salt for decades, surviving.

I eat and eat, and the crab and fruit have never tasted so good. It is as if my fae taste buds have grown, as if I've just been turned all over again. Min tells the story of what

we've just been through at least twice, as if I wasn't just there, enduring it.

Apparently, both Min and Goody had felt their powers returning but had been saving up their reserves in case they needed it. They had a good sleep at Kal's Connestell house and then woke up feeling better than ever. Then Kal sifted us here. Kal sits back and lets her explain that this is another house he built decades ago, invisible and warded for safety.

She starts again from the beginning. I laugh at Min's account of Goody's wall of flame, and my 'effortless smashing' of the orb. I catch Kal staring at me.

"I wish I could've seen it. Watched you do it. Amazing." I feel happy tingles all over my body under his gaze. He grabs my hand and leads me out the front door into the sand. We walk through some lush plants and palm trees to a little clearing. There is a hanging bed secured between two trees on a short beach. The pure white sand gives way to dazzling water sparkling a million shades of green and blue. It is absolute paradise. He stands behind me, his hands around my waist, letting me take it all in.

I turn in his arms and reach up to kiss him, hard, placing my hands on either side of his face. We open up to each other, and I feel him anew, new flavors, more texture, more desire. He puts a hand on my lower back and pulls me into him, pressed as close as we can be from mouth to toes. I shudder in pleasure as I feel the evidence of his desire for me. He kisses my neck as his hands roam all over. His mouth goes lower, onto my chest, and he pulls away with a growl.

“What?” I pant, at a loss.

“More rest. You need more rest first. Min can see what Eve saw in you now—she’s worried.”

“Kalamaeus Nuhm. I do *not* want to rest.” I keep my voice low and sure. A shiver runs through him.

“Blast it, Jay!” he whispers. To my great gratification, he has to take a long breath to recover. “Please, trust me.”

“When the time comes, *Mighty Kalamaeus*. I am going to make you *beg* for me, you wicked, terrible brute.” His eyes are heavy as they open, and his smile is confident.

“We’ll see.”

“Ugh!” He will drive me truly insane. He picks me up and places me in the swinging rope bed.

Determined, I cross my arms and close my eyes. I block out the breeze and the crashing waves and think only of him and how much I want him. I remember his sweating, naked chest in the forest. I remember his hand on my backside, my chest. I focus on the need deep in my core, growing warmer by the second. I find my hand wandering to that warmth. But then I feel Kal’s breath on my ear and freeze, my chest tight.

He whispers, in that low way of his, “The sooner you rest, the sooner you will be well enough for me to devour you whole.”

Then he is gone. Not even a kiss—he just walks away. He is right. It will be me begging, which irritates me. Will I always be at the mercy of males? What about what I want?

When I want it? I focus on my anger until I fall back into sleep.

I take a hot bath in the evening, the water caressing every single pore of my skin like an individual massage. I eat a feast at dinner. I can't seem to get enough of anything, food, water, sleep, the bath...Kal. That night we laugh around the table, and he shows us scenes from the other kingdoms.

He has seen so much that most cannot see, will never see. Fae royalty can hold official meetings in their courts and host officials from other kingdoms for trade agreements, but beyond that, it is forbidden to cross into other lands. Anyone caught past the trading posts of their home country is imprisoned or worse, so all anyone knows is rumors.

Kal spent decades making his way into each land, finding jobs and working his way to each kingdom's capitol city. Every single one. We marvel at white snow bears in cold jagged mountains, a whale jumping out of the sea, a sky city in Girmah, literally covered on every single surface with flowers of all kinds. Well before his audience is ready, he announces the show is over. "Time to sleep. Tomorrow, we train."

I don't protest. I will play his game now. Let him think I don't want him at all. Except I know my feelings will give me away if I am not careful.

I ready for bed and focus on my anger at the battle, the humans torn apart like mere dolls. I think of the tables and breeding centers and all the other lies. I breathe through my feelings, trying to find sleep. The inner draw to Aster that night is only a numb half-thought as I drift away.

As Kal suspected, I wake up feeling amazing. I feel a vague twinge for Aster but quickly block it out of my mind. I swear, even my skin is glowing. We eat a quick bite of eggs because Kal is excited to get us outside for his training.

Whatever that means.

He takes me to a clearing behind the house. As we near the edge of the field, Kal tussles my hair and, teasing, says, "Let's see what you've got, dancer." I shove him, expecting like always to hurt my arms more than to affect him in anyway. But he goes stumbling and almost falls down from surprise. My mouth falls open.

Min squeals, "Smart Kal! Mighty Kalamaeus was right!"

"Right about what?" I look to Kal who is grinning from ear to ear.

"That orb. The power went into us."

As if rehearsed, at that moment Goody sends a fireball into the sky. "Good day! Good day!" He laughs with glee. Min grows extended fingers out like tree branches, complete with smaller branches spilling off again and again. I stand there slack-jawed, bewildered at this crew who has clearly already been training. And they are enjoying it immensely.

"And you?" I turn to Kal. He shoots lightning from his right hand straight into his left and makes a ball. He grows the ball and throws it into a huge tree at the end of the clearing. The tree bursts immediately into a pile of ash.

"Good day!"

"So strong now, even Mightier!"

This explains my senses and urges. “And me?”

“Well, your strength, for one. You shoved me!” He is positively beside himself with enjoyment at this whole exercise. Males are so odd. “I’m going to strike you now.”

“You’re what?” I am not yet feeling their shared spirit of excitement.

“I don’t think I’ll be able. I think your reflexes will stop me.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“It won’t be hard. Ready yourself.” He walks closer to me.

“Hit me where? What if you crush my bones? What do you mean ready myself?”

Kal sighs heavily. “Jaylyn. I’m going to try to hit you. Block my hand. Okay?” I glare in protest but give him a slight nod. I spread my feet and brace for impact. I see him reach and I duck out of the way.

“Yes! Again!” He comes at me over and over. I block with my hand and foot. I spin, jump, and duck. I become untouchable. It is almost as if time is slower for me than it is for him. His adrenaline pulses out a rhythm that I can feel, anticipate. “Amazing! Again.” His smile gleams in the sun. We are sweating and panting, circling each other. Min and Goody cheer us on, in between their own experiments.

“Now the light.”

“What! You’ll fry me to cinders!”

Kal stops short, serious. His voice is soft. “How many times must I ask you to trust me?” He is genuinely hurt. I soften my face apologetically and ready myself.

I am not sure if he misses on purpose to test me, but I evade the light as well. It is harder than fighting his arms, but it still seems to move slowly enough for me to anticipate. And it has a rhythm too. I sense, almost perfectly, when and where he is going to strike. We go around and around. “Good. Again. Yes! Again.” He uses lightning, fist, and foot and barely makes any contact with me.

It is thrilling.

“Lunch.” We eat and drink and get back at it.

Goody throws fireballs and comes at me with his arms engulfed in flames. He is slow, still hunched and his hands still mangled, but I begin to see the warrior he once was. Min tries to strike me with her unsettling shape shifter arms. She is also now able to throw tiny fake arrows at me in my mind. I evade them all easily, feeling quite triumphant, until Kal and Goody fight me together.

I end up taking a fireball almost completely in the neck, but before my body hits the ground Min is on me. She works her healing hands while Kal hovers, terrified. “I’m fine!” I don’t look at him, knowing his concern for me will make me feel things. Min waves him away while she fixes my neck and also takes some of my muscle fatigue away. She makes for a truly wonderful teammate. They all do.

My singed neck is enough to squelch Kal’s enthusiasm for training for the day.

But there is mischief in his eyes when he turns to me and says, “Let’s swim.”

CHAPTER 41

We run for the water like children, laughing and stripping to our underclothes. I dive in. I have never felt anything so soothing. The rhythm of the ocean is so big and slow, it calms me immediately. The sand in my toes is scratching but soft at the same time, my feet feeling each individual grain. The warm salty water feels like a massage with all its varying textures and temperatures. All of us let out an exhale at the wonder of it.

When I stand, my underdress clings to me. I know Kal is watching. I know if I look over and see his tanned, sculpted chest, dripping with sparkling water, I will come undone. So I block out thoughts of him. Instead, I ask Min if she has ever felt the ocean before. She says she has but that her senses are heightened now as well. All of them are feeling like brand new fae.

Knowing Kal's senses are heightened is the motivation I need to keep from looking his way even once. He splashes me and I smile but dive as far from him as I can get. Goody catches a crab, which becomes the single most interesting thing I've ever laid eyes upon.

"Hey, green eyes," Kal calls to me. I say yes in reply but don't look up from the crab. "Come fly with me." He is walking my way through the water, and I know my pulse is starting to race. Blast my stupid body! I focus on the shells at my feet, picking one up with my toes. "Please?"

"I don't know, the water is pretty lovely." He is so close I can feel his body heat, but I am reaching down to get the

shell. *Clear your mind. The shell. The shell is pink. What a perfect shell shape. Breathe.*

His voice is so low I almost don't hear him. "All right...I'm begging."

The shell is rough on the top. The shell is smooth on the bottom. I force myself to take my time in looking up at him.

I drag my eyes up from the water. I take him in, his gentle, tensed hands, not touching me even though he wants to. His wings wet and shining. His smile is playful, but his eyes aren't playing our game anymore. I look at his chest, his muscles twitching with restraint, and I can no longer resist. I let all the feelings rush in. I smile my best *I told you so* smile at him and finally say. "I suppo—" But I am in his arms before I can finish the word, and we are already out of the water in one big jump.

I can barely breathe in his tight hold as we soar over the house and the grassy field. He banks around a hilltop, the back of which hides a waterfall, sparkling in the sunset. Its mist throws rainbows up at us, leaving me in breathless awe at its beauty. Kal kisses me behind my ear in response.

We turn towards the fall and land at the base next to the pool. There is just the waterfall and a small clearing. The whole area is surrounded by thick trees and plants at the base of a jutting rock face. It is a small private ravine all our own.

It is a dream.

He adjusts so I can stand, not letting our bodies slip apart, staring into my eyes as I slide all the way down his front.

My pulse is striking so hard inside me, I think beams of light might shoot from me instead of him.

He reaches up a hand and tucks my hair behind my ear. He smirks a bit and says, "Feel with your toes." I do.

We're standing on a bed of thick, soft moss that sends a chill up my spine. It is more than soft enough to lie on. I shiver and he dries us, taking away all traces of the saltwater. I put my hands on his shoulders and feel a rush of warmth from deep within me.

I am going to collapse from wanting him. It is a little embarrassing, to need him so badly. More than a little.

"What?" It is a quiet, gentle question as he holds my face in his hands.

"It's so unfair you get to feel how badly I want you. I can hardly stay standing, and you know it."

He grabs my hand and puts it over his heart. "Feel how fast it's beating." His voice is low now. "I've dreamed of you, over and over since before you even knew my name. I promise you, Jay, I want you more."

I let out a happy cry, a plea. He crushes his mouth onto mine, his tongue answering me with abandon. His hands explore my whole body, and mine, his. I expect him to wave our clothes away in a rush, but instead he slows. He kneels at my feet and looks up at me as he takes his time removing my underdress. He moves the fabric up my legs, kissing my calves and thighs as he goes, taking ages. My skin pebbles all over my body in excruciating anticipation as he lifts the thin sheath over my head.

He gathers my naked form up right away, his hot arms around me as he lays me down on the cool, soft moss. Sitting up on his knees, he removes his clothes, looking me over as I shake from desire and nerves. He bends over me and kisses me with passion—but also, restraint. He holds my head with one hand, dissolving all my nerves by looking into my eyes. He can't stop his smile as he moves his wings to form a cocoon around us, a light contrast to his golden tanned skin and dark hair.

He is unbelievable. I can't believe the beauty of him.

His other hand travels from my neck to my chest slowly, grazing, then tickling, then squeezing and pulling, his fingers leaving warm trails of feeling down my body. Finally, I whimper as his fingers land exactly where I need them. He presses into me, and the feeling of it all on my new keen senses is so totally different, so unbelievably pleasurable, it is like I've never been touched, never been with anyone before.

He kisses and sighs and smiles, feeling my feelings with me. He knows what I want, what I need, before I do. When I react, he looks into my eyes, or laughs into my skin. My happiness is his happiness, my pleasure his. Seeing him so completely happy washes more warmth over me. He moves his hand harder and faster in response.

I come undone right away, crying out his name.

The white heat is almost like the orb, destroying me in the best way. I shudder and have to close my eyes, remember to breathe. When I can think again, I can think of only one thing. I pull at his shoulders, begging for all of him. He is so firm and hot to the touch, as if he is about to

combust with want. He kisses me tenderly and looks into my eyes.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he whispers, hesitating.

“You won’t.” I pull at him and smile, completely relaxed, completely trusting him. If anything hurts the tiniest bit, he will know it.

He moves himself into position, watching me watch him every moment. He joins us together and has to close his eyes.

“Blast. Yes, Jay.” His voice cracks. I tremble at the size and strength and heat of him. He pauses, watching me. After a moment, I nod and bite my lip, ready, waiting. He pulls back and pushes in slowly as mist gathers in his eyes, overcome not only with pleasure but also with tenderness and joy.

It takes my breath away, to see him display such emotion so plainly. I also can’t look away from his form, his muscles flexing all around me, while his wings shelter us both. My warm feelings grow into a raging fire that lights up Kal’s animal need.

He asks me if I’m all right with his eyes, concerned and watching. And I pull on his shoulders again and manage to nod. And he becomes animal, warrior, and beast unleashed. He crashes into me again and again, and I meet him thrust for thrust, as if our bodies were made for each other. It is a rhythm of our own, one of pure ecstasy. When he cries out at his end, his wings bucking back, I cry out too, exploding again. Just as he said, I scream from the pleasure, and I am crying happy tears of deep affection for him and his care for me in return.

He collapses into the moss, pulling me onto him. A moment later a soft *Aster* pulls at my chest. I shake it out of my mind like swatting a gnat. I focus all my thoughts on Kal, his tenderness, his body, what he just did to me, with me, for me. He holds me to his chest, panting. “You were right,” I quickly say, hoping he didn’t feel me feeling anything other than bliss and affection.

“About?”

“It was worth the wait.” He chuckles and squeezes me tight. I sit up and look over him. I muster my best Kal-as-general impersonation, when he’s barking his orders. I look into his eyes and command him, “Again.”



The next day we eat, swim, and train all day. Kal and I escape to the moss in the morning and twice in the afternoon. Every single time my body erupts, my soul asks for *Aster*. It is faint and I grow to expect it, so there is no shock or guilt.

I hope I am doing a good enough job of masking it for Kal. He doesn’t seem to have much trouble getting past it. We decide not to share a bed inside the house, for lack of control. I also don’t want to break his heart muttering about *Aster* in my sleep. Min and Goody blush but say nothing.

These two days are the happiest I’ve ever felt.

I am back to moving my body every day and have turned fighting into my own kind of dance. I learn to evade each strike, and Kal teaches me to land blows with my hands and feet as well. I feel rhythms everywhere and use them to anticipate every advance. I train to change things—I have a goal ahead.

Kal is filled with glee, working with each of us. In the afternoon, he and Goody explode a massive fire lightning ball too closely, and their faces turn black with soot. Kal just freezes, like a dark stone statue, while Min and I laugh harder than I can ever remember laughing. When his smile breaks out, so white in contrast to the soot, we all laugh again.

The afternoon is also the start of my mental defense lessons. It seems to me that it would be unbearable to grow up in Neymu, unable to trust your own senses. Kal explains that most Soul faeries guard their minds and their homes from one another with spells and practice.

It is rare to come across skilled mind readers and mind painters. If one is skilled in that kind of manipulation, they serve in the armada or the court, staying close to the king. Which now means close to Zellis.

The mental exercises against Kal are the hardest for me. The first key is not to be touched by any sentries, which will be an easier feat with my new powers. The second line of defense is to think of nothing. Soul guards tend to feed off fear as they fight, Kal says, striking their opponents in moments of terror or doubt.

And I am basically fear on two legs.

Lovely.

The third, and most difficult task, is to use the magic around me to shield my mind.

“When you shielded your eyes in the rain. The thin barrier. You want to do that, but inside, around your mind.”

“Will...will that block you out?”

He shakes his head across from me in the grass, “My power is too strong. Even after decades of training against me, I could still feel Zellis, Leto. Even if it did, I’d still feel other things...” He smirks. “Other...sensations from your body.”

It takes considerable effort not to run and mount him this second.

He gloats with a proud smile to rival the sun itself.

“What about your wards on us?”

“They help, but they were very specific to reading the images in your mind. Not enough to stop a painter or an emotional manipulation.”

“Ugh.” I am definitely beginning to see why Soul is considered the strongest of the Kingdoms. If you don’t have your own mind, you have nothing. “Min, could you try again? Block out her arrows.”

I fail miserably, over and over. All my life I have been open, like a book on a table ready to be read, my emotions and feelings jumping off the page to anyone passing by. The book does not want to close.

Min, conversely, grows in her mental strength and shielding, finding it easy, since she is half Soul. Goody doesn’t seem to have much to hide in his thoughts. I feel

after this afternoon's exercises that I've become the weakest link in our chain.

"No one will be able to touch you." Kal tries to comfort me. But I look around our little group and then think of armies of graglins.

"So now, the four of us go and find Zellis and just...take him out?"

"Now we call in reinforcements. We need more fighters. Then we *just take him out*," he replies.

"And then, Mighty Kalamaeus becomes our king!" Min chirps happily.

King.

I hadn't even considered that. Dread, fear, and disgust rattle me with a start. Kal will have to rule, of course. He'll have to stay in that black hole of a palace.

And he will need a proper queen.

Kal shakes his head and puts a hand on my shoulder. "No. I don't want to be king. We'll right Father's wrongs and install someone else."

But I am not convinced.

The heaviness of it, the uncertainty, makes me sad and anxious. Kal just grabs my hand as we all walk together towards the beach to cool off. It is a short tense walk, and then out of nowhere, as she jumps into the water, Min chirps back at us.

"Just think after this is over, what powerful, beautiful babies you'll have! Oh, yes!"

I freeze, eyebrows raised, exactly like Kal beside me. Then we all laugh, hard, grateful for the surprising break in the tension.

In the evening after our swim, I ask how, exactly, he is going to send word to Lana—our ally, I remind myself—across the continent. “Can you mind talk or something?”

“Some can, but no, it’s much simpler than that. I’ll show you.”

We go inside, and Kal takes what appears to be plain paper and an envelope from the desk in his room, which looks much like mine, only larger. He waves his message to Leto and Lana on the paper, a series of words and locations. Kal says it will make sense to them, instructions and coordinates for them to join us at the beach house. He seals the envelope, puts it on the desk, and concentrates. With a wave of his hand, it’s gone.

He sighs afterward and explains. “Like grabbing a cup, but instead sending. Far. To a drawer in Lana’s desk.”

I don’t need to say anything since he feels my suspicion and irrational anger. Min was right, love does make you mad. I stand next to him at the desk, and he wraps his arms around me from the chair.

“Leto has a drawer too. The three of us used them as kids. But his is much more likely to be monitored.” His hands slide below my waist. “Though I do like the feeling of you jealous over me.” We leave the house immediately.

Hours later, on our bed of moss, Kal feels my enduring worry.

He squeezes me. “I have something to show you.”

“All right.” I settle in to see him show a landscape or memory. He has shown me a few happy memories from his childhood in the air above our little bed. The shows seem to be easier for him than sharing with words. I will take what I can get, ever eager to learn more of him.

“Don’t run screaming. It takes a lot of concentration, and I have to be touching you.”

“What?” Just after I say it, the warm evening, everything around us, dissolves into a bright sunny courtyard. Our courtyard. The moss patch is now right by the little table where I ate my lunch in the Star Palace. We aren’t looking at the scene—we are actually in it. The image is fuzzy, my mind can tell it isn’t real, but still. It is incredible. “Kal, it’s amazing.”

“I am not proficient, but it’s better since the orb. I think I am more Stars than I am Soul.” We lie there for a minute, and then the courtyard fades away.

“Is that why you don’t want to be king?” I am learning to wait quietly—wait for *forever*—for him to respond with his thoughts.

“I don’t want to rule. I want to bring you back here and demolish you with happiness.” His mouth goes from talking to doing other, far more interesting things.

CHAPTER 42

Late the next morning, after more mind-shattering time in the moss with Kal, we sit at the table in the beach house kitchen, discussing our loose plan for the day. Mid-sentence, Kal looks up, and the corner of his mouth twitches into a tiny smile. Leto and Lana. I try to hide my thousands of feelings about them. And by *them*, I mean Lana.

“They’re here already?”

Kal is almost excited—and still enjoying my jealousy. “Please try not to kill her. She’s a very talented memory reader.”

I grunt as we follow him out into the clearing behind the house. I don’t even know what memory reading entails, and what is Leto’s power? But my questions are cut short by my surprise to see three figures landing.

“Well, well, well. I’ll definitely be asking to borrow this little getaway,” Leto says as they land. Lana smiles warmly at all of us.

“You’d best be paying me for every day I don’t have my door open back in Nalamar.” Eve does not seem thrilled to be joining our group.

“Double.” Kal beams at her. She seems appeased as he turns to Min. “Eve, Min can get you up to speed. I’m sure she’ll be happy to have you assisting her, should we end up on a battlefield.”

“Oh, yes! Welcome sister! Though I will do the assisting. Yes, yes. So strong a healer. Oh, what fun to have you here!” Eve looks annoyed already.

Again, I am blindsided by Kal. His grace. To make Min feel important in that way when Eve is the stronger healer by leaps and bounds. He glances at me for a moment, probably confused why I suddenly wanted to tackle him and tear off his pants in front of all his old friends.

He will ask later and try to recreate my feelings, I have no doubt.

Min leads Eve to the house where the two will discuss more than healing. Eve knows his secret, having healed him as a boy. She is the only healer he’s ever trusted.

The plan for training, and later when we face Zellis, is for Kal to conceal his light unless things turn dire. Leto and Lana can’t find out, even though they are on our side. It is simply too dangerous. I hate the thought of any scenario that would push Kal to reveal his four-hundred-year-old secret and the fallout he’d face for doing so.

“So, what of your spies? Do we know where Zellis is?” Kal asks the gorgeous siblings.

“Not yet. We know he’s not in Neymu,” Lana answers.

“Has the High Council responded?”

“They’re in shambles with your father, Arian, and Rast all gone.” Leto says.

Kal nods. “Your father is managing court for now?”

“Yes, until you send word it’s time to move.”

“And did you know? Of the orb?”

“No.” Leto moves a hand to emphasize his point. “No one knew. Only that he was working on new weapons. He even kept our father away from the base.”

“Any news of its whereabouts?”

Leo sighs and Kal deflates. “But we’ll find it, Kal, and when we do, you’d better be ready, oh Ancient One.” Leto removes his satchel and jacket.

Kal turns to me. “I am ten years older.”

“Ten and a half, and we both know you’re rusty as can be. C’mon, let’s go.” He is readying to fight, I realize. He glances at me, “You’ve never seen your prince fight, have you?”

“Only about a hundred graglins by himself,” I say, proud. And a little flushed that he knows Kal is mine. I hope Lana heard that little nugget.

“Those teeny tiny little bone bunnies? That’s nothing. Observe, m’lady.”

Leto braces himself, and Kal’s eyes light up as Lana and I both sigh at them.

Goody is ecstatic. “Good day!”

Males.

I almost choke on my sigh, though, because they are at each other so fast. It is like watching two Kal’s, the way they move and punch and block. Clearly, they’ve been doing this for decades. And the force of them. When they crash into each other with full strength, I feel a wave of power come off them and hit my collar bones. I feel the rhythm of their fight on the ground through my boots.

“Up!” Kal shouts and they push off into the sky. Within a breath they are so high I can barely spot them, but we can hear the collision of their mass even down on the grass.

Then I see them coming down, just free falling through the sky while bashing each other to bits. Wrestling in midair, hurtling towards death. They are utterly insane. My heart starts to pound as they grow closer and closer to us, but at the last moment they part and land on their feet.

“Knives!” Leto calls, and suddenly both have weapons, out of nowhere. They do not hold back at all. Of course. No need to hold back with two healers in your party. It almost gets boring at how much they block each other’s every advance.

Leto glances at me. “Didn’t think he was the only warrior legend in Neymu, did you?” That makes Kal smile and gives him new energy. So Kal actually *had* been holding back. He moves faster and harder, and soon Leto has slices on both arms.

“Are you quite finished?” Lana rolls her eyes at them.

“All right, all right.” Leto glances at me, panting, and says to Kal, “You said in your note she was a surprisingly good fighter. Let’s see it.” His arms are already almost fully healed, without Eve’s help.

Kal’s sneaky smile thrills me as he motions with his hands for me to join them in the grass. I am happy to show off for his friends, for him. He advances, and just like in all of our practice so far, I evade every tactic. It helps that he is only using his limbs and not also trying to fry me to ash.

After a few rounds, Kal pants, “Goody.” And Goody steps in, throwing his fire balls, fire spears, and flaming chains at me. After Goody is spent, which doesn’t take long, Leto claps.

“Very well done, Jaylyn. And in her mind?” Leto is very amused.

“I am not as skilled a painter as you.” Kal is suddenly tentative in a way I don’t quite understand.

“Oh, so you’ve really not trained at all, then. Well, good that you brought in the master.” Leto makes Kal laugh over and over, and I find myself loving him for it. It is good to see Kal so happy.

“Lunch first.”

Leto makes his face gruff and solemn, mocking Kal. “Lunch first.”

Yes, Leto is quickly becoming my second favorite faerie.

Kal ignores our teasing, leading us to the house where Min and Eve are already whipping up something that smells delectable. We stand, sit, and lean around the kitchen eating and chatting. I ask all about their childhoods—Kal’s childhood.

Both siblings share hilarious stories, but I don’t miss the way Lana looks at Kal. I would wager the whole Whistler that she loved him when he up and left and has missed him everyday since. I also guess they were an idyllic match, a high lady, the advisor’s daughter.

They were likely close to being married off, to the delight of both Zaynr and Dramadus, when he vanished. Now he’s

flashed back into her life without warning, infatuated with a girl, not even a true fae. I almost feel for her, how awful all this must be.

Almost.

As we knew they would, they ask to hear our story, my story. The only part we leave out is that Kal was serving in the palace as a sentry. Instead, we tell them he'd been a spy and happened to witness my abandonment during the attack and jumped to rescue me.

"I'm sorry. About the table. I've heard it is unbearably painful," Lana says to me, sincerely. Kal tenses, and I remind myself not to give away that he was there.

No one knows what to say. I find my best tavern smile and ask Min to take over with our story. She goes on with glee. Leto particularly loves hearing about Kal's work with the quill.

"Brilliant, Kal. I *knew* you had brains in that giant skull of yours! And I would've *loved* to see you when she pulled it. Did he faint, Jay, did he?"

"Dropped like a stone," I say, straight-faced. Everyone laughs, even Kal, and even Lana.

Jay. Kal's friend is becoming my friend. My eyes burn for a minute, realizing how much I miss friends. Miss Welton.

Min and I take turns retelling the forest, the palace, the battle. Kal, in as few words as possible, answers a thousand questions from Leto about the battle and the graglins. I do the same regarding the orb, from sensing it to the bitter shards of pain that went from my fingers up into my very skull.

Leto gives a low whistle and then mutters, "Bloody stars. And no one else could sense it?"

"I guess not."

"You all have been through...so much together," Lana finally comments. It is strained and awkward, and I am grateful for Min.

"Mighty Kalamaeus and Brave Jaylyn, our saviors! So powerful! Oh, yes!" she squeaks.

"I shall have to save your life next, Lady Min." Leto charms her. "So that I can earn such praises. When this over, can I steal you away to court with me?" Of course, Min just falls to pieces at that, her cheeks turning about ninety shades of pink.

"Sorry. We can't live without her," I say and she falls to pieces again.

"Pity. Well, Kal, what say you, enough gabbing like old ladies?"

"Quite."

Back out in the clearing, Leto and I walk into the grass as he explains what I am about to endure. "You know what a painter does, right? A good one, not a sorry one like Kal."

"Makes me see something else in my mind when they touch me."

"See," Leto corrects me, "and hear and smell and taste and feel. And there are a few who can do it without touching."

"Easy at first." Kal grouses from the side, not far from us.

I appreciate his protectiveness over me, but I also wish he'd show a bit more confidence. I am determined to not be the liability of our little band. Tough orders, now that Min and Goody are fighting with such strength.

"All right, Kal, settle down." Leto rolls his eyes. "How about we start with a little knife throwing?" He pulls a knife from his boot with a smile.

He flashes it to present it to me as he walks away. But as he makes his silly show, he stumbles and tosses the knife. It flies through the air unbelievably fast and lodges straight into Kal's thigh. It must have hit a large artery at the blood that ruptures, and Kal cries out and falls over in pain as I run to him screaming.

"Enough!"

Suddenly Kal is standing straight and glaring daggers at Leto as he walks to me.

Leto's hands are up. "It was just a small knife to your thigh...but perhaps I overdid your pain."

Adrenaline is coursing through me, and my soul cries *Aster* in response. I started to panic—Leto hasn't even touched me, and it was impossible to decipher the difference.

Kal rubs his hands on my arms, still glaring, looking as if he is about to beat Leto to a pulp, when I see Lana's face. She pities me. And Min is worried.

I back out of Kal's touch. "Again. Teach me what to do." Kal is confused at my response, and still livid, but he backs off.

"Sorry about that." Leto winces at me.

“Don’t be sorry. This is training.” I smirk and look to Kal. “*Mother* will have to calm herself.” Everyone loves that, and Kal gives me an apologetic grin. I am smiling, and Leto is too. I *will not* be our weak link.

“Right, then. So, in paintings, things are false, made up by my brain. Well, my brain sometimes ignores the laws of nature. There was a giveaway in that scene.”

“The throw?”

“Very good! It moved too fast. Now. How about you come and try to land a blow on me.”

I take a step towards him and then my feet can’t move. I am sinking into the ground. I know in my brain that it isn’t real because we are training, but the feeling of terror still washes over me. It feels very real. Then it is over, and I am panting again.

Leto steps towards me. “In that case, the ground doesn’t move that way, right?”

“Well,” I answer, irritated with him and myself, “this is magic faerie fantasy land where everything is absolute madness. How can I know the ground isn’t actually moving that way?”

Leto laughs. “That’s a brilliant point, actually.” I know Kal is positively glowing at me with pride, even though I won’t look in his direction. I need to focus. “If someone were to spell the land, I supposed it could do something like that. But you would’ve still been able to move your legs, to try and break free...probably.” He is still grinning, but this isn’t funny to me.

“So, how do I know it’s not real and then break out of it?”

“Aha! The main question—and the hardest lesson. You have to feel the painting happening in your mind and push me out of your head. Which is difficult to master. The first step, though, is the realization. If you’re aware of what’s happening, you can stay calm and think it through.”

“Think what through?”

“If I sent arrows at your head, for example, what would you do?”

“Evade them.”

“Yes, so if I want you to run left, in your mind I’d put a bear chasing at you from the right.”

“Let me see that.”

He turns to Kal with glee, “Oh, I like this one *very* much.”

Suddenly there it is, a massive black bear approaching from the right. It is growling and drooling and moving slowly. Then it charges at me, and I turn and run straight into it. It vanishes.

“Blast me. Very good.” He tells the others, “She ran right into the bear! Stars! Often a painter doesn’t have the time to think through tiny details. Running towards the illusion can often take the painter off guard and force them to have to come up with something else. Did Kal tell you to do that?”

“No,” Kal says. I look at him, and I am right. He is positively giddy with pride. The hugest smile. Unabashed. I try to choke down the feeling of warmth and confidence I feel under his gaze. I need to prove myself.

“The arrows.” I look to my new teacher. “If you send them at me, what if they hit? Will I feel pain in my mind?”

“Most likely.”

“Lovely. Just lovely.”

Leto grimaces. “Welcome to faerie fantasy land?”

“All right then, let’s do whatever exercises to help me feel you and push you out.”

“Very well, my lady.”

At the edge of the clearing, I see them, coming through the trees. Elves. Three of them, with their bows loaded, arrows trained on me. They are a ways off, picking up their pace towards me. I notice their faces are identical. The first clue. Their arms don’t move while they walk, which is the second unnatural hint. Now to find where they are coming from in my mind. I take a deep breath and close my eyes.

Pulsing. It’s faint, but there is a rhythm. I focus on the rhythm, like I did on the battlefield. I open my eyes to see, but the elves have stopped just in front of me, all three arrows trained on my heart. Which begins racing, even though I know it is an illusion.

I can’t see the pulsing by looking at them, so I close my eyes again. I feel in my head, trying to make the pulsing louder. It does grow louder.

I try to will it to stop. No change. A headache is starting as the magic grows louder and louder, reverberating painfully.

“Almost!” Leto is pleased. The pulse is gone. I gasp and grab my head. Kal is already beside me, holding his hand over mine on my head. “Would you please quit threatening

to kill me by way of your eyeballs, Kalamaeus? She asked! And she was so close. Astounding, truly, leagues beyond where she should be.”

Kal pulls me back to look into my eyes.

“I’m fine. Let’s go again,” I say, barely getting out the words.

“That’s the spirit!” Leto is almost as cheery as Min.

“Go to Eve first.” It is an order, but the concern on his face melts me. I nod.

Eve fixes me up right away, and we train the rest of the afternoon, physically and mentally. I watch Lana fight her brother and have to admit she is formidable. She has been very well trained but doesn’t seem to be exceptionally strong or agile. Her powers are in her mind—and not necessarily best suited for battle. Or at least as far as I understand them.

Come nightfall, we have a happy dinner around the dining table, and I ask her.

“Kal says you’re a very skilled memory reader. How is that different from regular mind reading?”

“Mind readers can see memories, but the subject has to be actively remembering that memory. I can go into memories on my own, if I can touch their skin long enough for my search.”

“Without people’s bloody permission, is what she means. Don’t let her get a long hold on you, Jay,” her brother teases, and as always, she is gracious.

“Don’t listen to him. I would never do that to a friend.”

Min pipes in, “Powerful Lana, such a special gift! Could you read our Goody?”

Kal speaks up for probably the first time the whole dinner. “You could get lost. It’s risky.”

“I could try and see. If it’s hazy, I’ll pull out straight away.”

Kal nods.

I don’t miss that he just took care of her, looked out for her. And that she basically asked him for permission. But that’s what friends do. *Lana is our friend, for stars’ sake! Get a hold of yourself!*

Lana kneels in front of Goody, “Could I try to find your memories, Goody? It won’t hurt.”

“Good day. Good day.” He nods.

Sweet Goody, he would’ve said yes if she’d asked to kindly stab him in the groin. Which she wouldn’t. *A friend, Jaylyn!* I am going to have to leave the room at the rate I am deteriorating into pettiness. I am sitting across from Kal and don’t dare look at him. I’m positive he is as amused as he can be, feeling my silly jealous feelings.

Lana holds Goody’s hand for just a minute. She pulls away with a gasp. “Blast me.”

“Well? C’mon!” Leto says as if she’s held out information like this from him many a time.

“It’d be better if Kal showed you?” Kal nods and reaches out a hand to her. She touches Kal for just a few seconds. But Kal has to gather himself afterward. Leto must sense my confusion.

“She can also plant. Not the same as painting, just planting a single idea in someone’s mind. Come, Kal, we’re all dying here.”

Kal stands and shows all of us a scene. It’s Goody, but young and strong and fierce. His wings are huge and white with orange and gold flecks. He is in armor on a battlefield, totally surrounded. He jumps up off the ground and flaps to hover in place as he pushes his arms down and out, hands fisted. He pulls his arms up over his head, and as he does so, a fire shape forms in front of him. It grows quickly all around him until it is massive and moving.

A dragon.

Goody makes a fire dragon, complete with wings, talons, tail, everything. It even seems to have scales of fire on its skin. It acts as if it is separate magic, moving independently from him, as he still shoots out fire from his hands. It loops around and takes out every single sentry surrounding him. The images fade away, and we are back in the kitchen, silent and in awe.

“Regulus Pahm,” Leto whispers. “Goody...is *The Inferno*.”

Goody doesn’t respond. He is crying and staring at the image he just saw of his former self. Kal moves behind Goody and puts a hand on his shoulder.

Min is also crying and says nothing. I look around the room, and every single faerie is crying. Except Kal, of course. But he is moved. So they all know Goody’s story. It is Lana who realizes I am totally in the dark.

“Regulus Pahm was, er, I mean...his story is legend. From centuries ago. He was a general in the fire armada. He fell

in love with a half-blood prisoner of the Stars. He freed her from prison, but they re-captured her, and he freed her again, three different times.”

“His fire was so hot, he could bring buildings to the ground. He would send fire animals ahead of him, and soldiers would just flee at the sight of them.” Leto is barely talking above a whisper.

“He also beat hundreds of faeries in single combat to defend her. Our stories say they lived hundreds of years together in secret until someone found them and shot her with an arrow from afar. He didn’t have the chance to protect her. He went to court and produced the first and only full sized fire dragon ever on record. He killed hundreds of Star soldiers, even with their lightning, and almost the entire Lamento court that was there, his own kind...and then he surrendered himself for his crimes.”

“Oh, Goody, my brave strong warrior friend.” Min hugs him. “I wish I had known. We could’ve talked all about Tehdia all day long.”

“Tehdia?” Lana asks.

“That was her name, of course. Regulus’s lost love. I remember, that was her name, of course it was.” We are all sniffs and awe. I am unsure of what we should say—can say. Does Goody understand it? Is he happy to be known, seen as his former self? Maybe it’s painful.

“I mean, I drew pictures of him in my notebooks when I was a kid.” Leto is, clearly, still in a considerable amount of shock.

“Oh, do you think we should call Goody Regulus? Oh, that would be so very hard to not call Goody Goody. Maybe we should try Reggie?” Min is spiraling. No one knows what to do.

Kal stands and offers a hand to Goody. He doesn't squat down like the rest of us would have. He pulls Goody up, warrior to warrior. Goody stands, somehow understanding at least part of what is happening. I am crying now too at the sight of them, two warriors together. It doesn't even matter what Kal will say next.

“It was an honor to fight with you already. More so now, knowing your name, General Pahn. Would you like for us to call you Regulus? Or General?”

“Good day. Good day.” It is soft and he looks down, but I have no idea what the answer was.

Kal is sure. “Goody it is.”

“Oh, thank you, Goody, you know it would've been so hard for me to change, Goody, so hard.”

Eve wipes her eyes. “No one will ever believe this back home, I can tell you that.”

Leto is still muttering. “I carved a piece of wood into a fire dragon when I was ten...”



After a round of good nights, we shuffle to our individual rooms. There are enough that no one has to share, much to my chagrin. After I climb into bed, in a huff that I wasn't

whisked away to my waterfall after dinner, Kal knocks. I look to the door, happy, and he comes in.

I smile and open the sheets for him.

“Not a chance.”

I send as much irritation his way as I possibly can. “Well, then, what are you doing in my bed chamber, sentry?”

He sits on the bed next to me and just stares, grinning like a fool. “You did so well today.” I let myself feel all the happiness that his pride gives me. I look down and then back up at him, eyelids heavy.

“Then I think I deserve to be taken to my waterfall, at once.”

His voice is low so I almost don't hear him, “Of course, my lady.”

CHAPTER 43

I wake to my chest's usual soft pang, but this time there is no Kal bursting through my door. Odd. I don a dancing robe, now my fighting attire, and make my way to find Min.

"He's flying, brave Jaylyn!" His whereabouts are out of her mouth as soon as she sees me. I smile and flush a bit at my predictability. I pass through to the dining room and then look out the front window.

There I see it, my nightmare—albeit a petty nightmare—come to life.

Across the field, Kal and Lana land together, laughing and smiling. Kal's full huge smile. I can tell she was sparring with him, teasing. And I see her arm link through his as they walk. He doesn't tense or pull away.

Unsure of Kal's range on my emotions, I take a few deep breaths and focus on how sore I am. I truly ache all over from yesterday's training. Eve and Min healed our wounds, but we didn't let them take away all our fatigue. They need to stay rested and ready as well.

I don't think I'll ever get used to how beautiful they are, the fae. Kal and his friends glisten and glow. I can't deny it; Lana looks to be Kal's perfect counterpart. The right height, just a bit shorter than him, the perfect figure, breasts bigger than mine, to be sure...

I walk quickly back to my room.

I feel a bit stupid as I rush away and ask Min to join me in my small bedroom mirror and make adjustments. Her flesh

abilities mean she can change the fabric. Like the bowl of soup Kal made me fix, it came back together but had cracks. Min can make the bowl completely whole again. Or shape its stone into something else entirely.

To ask her to use her power on this is silly.

But also, is it? I have pushed Kal away over and over, made his days more difficult, and I can see with Lana he is...relaxed. They were at ease just now. And I will truly never be one of them, a born faerie. Won't read minds or paint thoughts or be able to fly.

I ask Min to change the color of my dancing robes to a warm white. The light shade brings out the new color the sun has baked onto my skin over the last few days. She reveals no thoughts about making the midsection of the robes tighter, which pushes up my breasts a bit. We take in a bit of the fabric around my behind and thighs as well.

It is called sewing, her Flesh powers. Min doesn't need a needle and thread, she just manipulates the fabric with her hands. It is different than snapping for water or repairing a bowl. She can see how things are meant to work. Like a watch maker understanding the innards of a watch but for, well, almost every object, I suppose.

She is happily chirping along about how I've grown even stronger and leaner, I need to eat more and so on. I have been wearing my hair pulled back and tied at my neck for training, but I leave it down. I feel happy with what I see in the mirror. Kal has never seen me in this color.

As I make my way into the kitchen, where I can hear everyone babbling, Kal and Lana are standing over the kitchen table with their backs to me, engrossed in

something. Lana has her hand on the back of Kal's arm, and I can't help the wave of rage.

Stupid girl. Kal turns immediately, and to my delight, he is taken aback by my new robes. I barely glance at him.

"Good morning, what's this?" I ask, noticing Lana drops her hand as I approach to see the maps before them. Kal is still staring at me.

"We've heard from our informants that Zellis is in the high mountains, east of Raelus," she answers.

"So, still in Connestell." That is disappointing. I was hoping our fight would stay in Neymu where Aster's pull on my soul isn't so consuming. Apparently, the physical distance matters, and according to my chest cavity, he is in Connestell, so I was hoping I wouldn't need to be.

Kal puts a hand on my back and clears his throat to comment, but I don't look up at him. "It's odd. Graglins wouldn't fare well in those mountains."

"He's taken some of the Neymu armada there with him, though. The note said a camp of soldiers. Graglins would not stay put up in a camp, would they?" Lana speaks to him like a partner, working with him to solve the riddle.

"No." Kal is deep in thought.

"Where is Leto this morning?" I am asking Lana, but Kal answers.

"He went on an errand after we heard word of this."

"So, what is our plan?"

Lana points to the map again. "We get to Zellis in the next couple days, before he moves."

Kal looks up at the ceiling, distracted. Then he puts his hands on my shoulders and turns me towards him, grinning, "I have a surprise for you."

He leads me out the front door into the field, and then suddenly three figures are in front of me. Leto, Stokker the elf and...Welton!

"Welt! Welt?!" I scream and run to him full speed. I hear Kal mutter some warning, but it is too late. I forget my new strength, and my tackling hug throws myself and Welton through the air and smashing into the ground.

"Bloody bleeding stars and skies, Jay! What? Who? What!"

I just laugh as I pull him up to his feet. He looks me up and down.

"You have *so* much explaining to do."

It is such glee, absolute, pure glee. And when I turn back and see Kal smiling, I just have to run to him and thank him. I run and jump in his arms, wrapping my legs around him and showering him with kisses and thank yous. He wraps his wings around us so his friends won't see my unabashed display.

His eyes are closed, because I keep kissing all around them, just covering his face like a mask, and he is smiling as he pulls me down from his torso, "Go. Go see your friend."

I hug him one last time and stretch up to whisper in his ear, "I'll thank you properly later." Then I turn and bounce away.

Welton is, understandably, confused and terrified and also taking in the beauty of the fae, primarily Kal and Leto.

And me.

“You look amazing, Jay. What’ve they done to you? Can they do it to me?” We laugh, and I remember that the elf who stole me and started this whole painful journey is now standing next to Leto. Kal walks up to him, at his full height, completely the commander.

“I want to kill you, elf, and I might. In fact, *she* might.” Kal cocks his head at me. He goes on, almost growling. “To save yourself, you will tell us of your east mountains, and you will teach the lady your skills.”

“You’ve got the wrong elf, I—”

“Your reputation precedes you. A thief and a thug, but also the best archer in Connestell. Serve us or die now, rat.” Stokker just looks down with a submissive nod.

“Holy skies, remind me to never cross your boyfriend.” Welton is already making me laugh.

My heart is so full I could die in this moment. I will ask Kal all about archery and whatever else later. First, I lead Welt into the house and introduce him to the others. Min dissolves into a puddle of joy at the sight of him and immediately asks him to play a song. He pulls his lute satchel from his back.

“Well, I think mighty dancer here killed it.” Welton sighs. The lute was smashed when we both landed square on top of it.

“Oh, it’s no problem, I’ll sew it back. Let me help you, Mighty Whistler, oh, yes, please.”

It is one of the most fun moments of my fae life so far, watching Welton watch Min sew his lute back together with a couple waves of her hand.

“Blast me.”

“Oh, Welt. Just wait. I have to train now, but come watch, and Min can tell you everything.”

“Train?”

“You have no idea.” I cackle. “Just...just wait.”

Out all of us go, except for Goody and Lana. Leto and Kal are talking about swords and Min has already started on our story.

Finally, out comes Goody and behind him, Lana, but... changed.

My dress robes now feel like Goody’s old prison tunic.

She has fashioned herself something similar to my robes, but the pants are like male pants, tight and tucked down into her boots. Her pants are tan and her shirt is also tan... if one could call it a shirt. It doesn’t cover her entire torso, scrunching tight under her breasts.

I admit it looks perfect for training in the heat, but I know that’s not why she chose it. Her long dark hair is tied up high on her head, cascading down like the pointed hats princesses sometimes wear. It looks very calculated to me, and I am ready to declare war.

But at the same time, her posture is unassuming, relaxed. She can’t help that she is breathtaking. Is she a viper trying to steal my Kal away? I am not sure. But I am sure it is a strong possibility.

Goody, Stokker, and even Welton gape, and Kal notices her as well, though he looks away quickly. Leto looks awkward.

“Leto, let’s warm up.” I hop out into the grass and motion for Leto to come at me with a smile. I know Kal probably felt my rage spasm, but I pushed it away quickly, focusing on the fight at hand.

Leto, with delight, runs to challenge me, telling Welton, “Enjoy the show, Bard!”

And we begin. I push Leto to push me, enjoying Kal’s eyes on us as I evade every kick and punch. Welton exclaims many times, in fear I’d be struck and then in shock at my new skills. It is not only fun, it is the physical release I need from all of this morning’s emotions.

“Good. Enough defense.” Leto takes off his shirt, gleaming in the sun just like Kal. Kal, whom I am not going to look at. “Come, dancer, show me what you’ve got.”

I don’t have much at first. He blocks every punch and kick so hard, my hands and feet start to ache. I spin, and he holds my foot for a second, about to say something cocky, and I punch him square in the jaw. It hurts my hand terribly, but Min and Welton cheer as if I’ve just won a whole war.

But quickly, Leto grabs my leg and flips me, pinning me to the ground.

He is on top of me in an instant, and I can’t help but notice him up close. He looks so much like Kal but softer, smaller. More beautiful and less rugged, like a darker version of Aster. His chest and abs are almost as impressive

as Kal's, though, and his sweat is dripping down onto my clothes. We only pause there for a millisecond, with Leto smiling down at me.

Then a wall of feather bursts through from the right side of my vision. Kal is on him, on the ground, punching.

Leto is blocking his face with his arms and half-laughing, half-pleading, "Sorry, mate, sorry, she's a beautiful girl, blast, sorry, no! No, she's ugly! Ugliest creature I've ever seen!"

"Kal!" He glares up at me, clearly very angry at me too. But he hops off of his friend and backs up. As always, he says nothing.

Welton, bless him, breaks through the tension, "Well, Jay I can see why you didn't bother coming home. Wings above, this is thrilling!"

"I can't wait to hear your songs about me, bard. Warrior Mind-Painter!" Leto is all too happy for the change in attention.

Kal won't look at me as Leto and Min tell Welton more of the fae ways. I think he may actually be more than jealous. I think he's hurt. Which is what I had been over their flying this morning. I sigh, missing the few precious moments before his friends' arrival burst our warm, sandy bubble.

I walk up and put a hand on his arm. At least he doesn't pull away. "Should I start with the bow and arrow?" He nods, still looking down and panting from his outburst.

"Elf," Kal calls out. Stokker makes his way to us, timid. Kal turns to me. "I was thinking your agility may transfer to weapons, feeling the weight of them, how they'll move. I

didn't want to start with blades." Kal waves in some targets and weapons for us at the back of the clearing and turns, dismissing me. I watch his back flex as he walks away, calling for Goody to train with him.

That afternoon, the faeries train and Stokker, begrudgingly, works with me. I am not too thrilled to spend time with him either. The basics of the bow and arrow are easy, but once again, I have to clear my mind to aim. I can feel the weight of the arrow and the rhythm of the wind, but it isn't as easy as close-range fighting. It takes a good deal of concentration to start hitting the target just off center.

"Very good for your first time. The beast was right about you." Stokker seems impressed.

"I'm a beast, too, now, thanks to you."

"You're welcome. Isn't that the dream, to become immortal and marry and pop out lots of little beasties?" He spits the words just like the elf in the forest did.

"Oh, yes, becoming a sex slave for my overlords was all I wrote about in my diary." His cold, angry demeanor relaxes a fraction with a genuine laugh. I need to know who he really is. "What's your relationship with Aster? He knew you by name."

"As you saw, I'm good at blending in. I pick up information."

"You're his spy."

"Not his spy. Anyone's spy. So," he glances back at Kal. "How did *you* end up so far from home?"

“Captured in the attack. Ended up in a Neymu dungeon, and the prince befriended me.”

“How romantic. So, now you love what you used to hate?”

“I love these few. I still hate...what the fae have done. What they do to humans. Their world. So...” I let an arrow fly. Just off center, still. “We’re going to bring it down.”

He chuffs at me. “You and the Prince of Darkness, son of the absolute *worst* of the worst, his friends, a couple of broken faeries, and a human bard—you are going to bring down the fae? You’re mad.”

I shake my head. “No, actually.” That doesn’t sound right. “Not bring down the faeries. No. Raise up the humans. Raise up the elves and the hobbits...carve out some clouds for the rest of us.”

Stokker squints his eyes at me. “I very much hate all of them.” He gestures to the group at the other end of the clearing. “But I think I like you, dancer. I think I like you.”



Towards the end of the day, Kal concedes and I get back to my mental training with Leto. He paints a million different scenarios, including throwing a knife at me so I can feel the fake pain in my head. Kal, surprisingly, doesn’t intervene.

I feel the rhythm of Leto’s painting in my head but can’t speed it up or slow it down. Leto keeps saying to shut it out, but all my attempts fail. In one painful exercise with an

arrow to the arm, I remember the pain of the orb and chain.

Let it in.

So I focus on the rhythm of the magic and imagine an orchestra playing along. I let the rhythm fill my head and turn it into my own thought, my own song.

The arrow and the pain disappear.

“Yes! Fantastic, Jaylyn!”

I smile at Kal, who is busy with Goody, not looking. So I get back to work. “Again.”

That night, we all swim together—the ladies fully clothed—then eat and laugh in the kitchen. Welton sings us songs, even some verses he’s just written about us. Kal shows us requested scenes in the air, since, I’ve learned, Leto can only paint one mind at a time.

Min asks me to dance, but I claim exhaustion, which is true. We are all totally spent. Stokker lurks at the back of the room, but even he laughs and marvels and enjoys himself. That night at dinner, Kal and I don’t look at each other, don’t touch. I supposed this is our first lover’s quarrel, if we are lovers? Is that what this is? Love? And is it our first quarrel when really all we did was quarrel in the past?

It feels different, this argument.

I am miserable.

After dinner, Welton and I go to the hanging bed by the water’s edge to continue catching up.

“Jay, are you really all right? You should be dead three, four times over! It’s wild, totally wild!”

I sigh. “I am, really I am. Thanks to Kal.”

“Whew, the way he looks at you. Totally besotted.”

I grimace. “Not today.”

“Eh, that thing with Leto was stupid. He’ll get past it. What of your actual soulmate? What is he like?”

“He is fine, handsome, charming. I was caught up with him, and him with me, but I barely knew him. It wasn’t... like this.”

“But...*he’s* your soulmate. Not Kal.”

“Right. But I don’t care, I choose Kal.”

“And the Prince of Stars is just going to...let you go?”

My insides twist to match the rope of the hanging bed, tight and pulled and swaying.

“I don’t know.”

“And the Star Prince can’t marry you, but the Soul Prince can?”

I sigh again but this one is different, heavy. Welton is right. “Can you please stop asking such good questions? We haven’t even talked about what happens after we, you know, save the whole world.”

“Right. Okay. So. You take down the evil brother, smash the evil orb, kill the evil graglin army, denounce your handsome charming soulmate, and then live happily ever after with ‘Mighty Kalamaeus.’” He shrugs, and we both laugh hard at the absurdity of it.

“You forgot I also want to take out the tables, burn the breeding centers, change the dowries and salaries and all of it. Probably starting in Neymu where Kal has influence. He agrees with me.”

“Influence. You mean king. He’s going to be king, Jay.”

“He says he doesn’t want that.”

“Hmm.” Welton pushes the bed to start swinging again. “And what do you want? To come back here and marry him and have his giant beautiful babies?”

“Well, yes, obviously. All his massive babies.” He knows it is a joke, but in every jest there’s a jab of truth. He knows that too.

“Show me some more tricks.”

After a couple hours of bliss with my best friend, we walk back into the quiet house. I don’t know if I should go to Kal’s room. I don’t want to wake him or make him angry. I know he has a lot on his mind and doesn’t need his silly female making it worse.

And am I his female? Has he made such a declaration?

I decide to go to my own bed, and there, I weep. Part of it is exhaustion, part of it is confusion. Welton asked such cutting questions, and I don’t have any answers. With the deep sadness, my soul twists for Aster.

I don’t want that. I don’t want to be in a lover’s quarrel. I expect my tumultuous feelings to draw Kal to me in a flash, as they always have. But either because he is asleep or because he doesn’t want to comfort me, Kal doesn’t come.

CHAPTER 44

When I jolt up the next morning, fresh sadness washes over me. He never came in the night. But relief follows when Kal burst through my door and gathers me up into his arms.

I nestle into his neck. “You came.”

“Of course I came.”

“Last night you didn’t, yesterday morning you didn’t.”

“Deeply asleep and out of range.”

“Out of range flying with Lana.”

“And Leto. We left together, and he sifted away to get Welton.”

“Oh.”

“She is just a friend, Jay.”

My throat tightens. “She was all over you yesterday.”

“I didn’t even notice, but you...you and Leto? What was that?”

“I’m sorry, I was just hurt. I thought you and she had been frolicking in the sky together.”

He pulls back to stare at me, and I know he is trying to find words. He strokes my hair, and I wait. “I am yours. Wholly yours.”

My heart screams at his choice of phrase. Here I am doubting him when I am not, cannot be, wholly his. He kisses me firmly and pulls away. “Last training day. Breakfast.”

I need to make up for my stupidity, so my hand wanders up his thigh and I whisper in his ear. “I still need to thank you for my surprise.”

His voice cracks a bit. “Breakfast can wait.”

And away we go for a quick trip to our waterfall.



Our last day is brutal. Eve and Min patch us all, again and again. Stokker works with Leto and Lana—again dressed in her seductive fighting clothes, which I try to ignore—on the targets, as well as with me.

Stokker is truly skilled, as a shooter and a teacher. Even Kal watches and listens to his pointers from the side. Surprisingly, I find myself feeling friendship towards him. He has a hard shell around him, but he makes jokes and pushes us in our exercises. I feel he is rooting for us, or for me, at least.

I also try hard to cultivate a friendship with Lana. She doesn't touch Kal anymore, that I notice. I still don't trust that she wouldn't try to woo him, but she is so calm and quiet. In fact, her nature reminds me of Kal himself, which I hate. Because again, they seem to complement each other so well. But she is graceful and well-trained, so I ask her for pointers.

Leto insists that we fight each other, which makes Kal tense up like the bowstrings we've worked with all morning.

“Feel like giving these idiots a show?” I ask her. Lana smiles and readies herself.

She is infinitely easier to evade than the males. She is fast, but her blows feel weak. I block her jab at my face, and she holds my forearm, just for a moment. I pull out of her grasp to the left where her hand is waiting. The blow smarts, and I reel for a second. Kal changes his posture in my peripheral vision.

“Planting,” she huffs out.

So she can plant a move in someone’s mind.

I nod with a small smile. “Again.”

I am not going to be the fragile flower among thick thorny warrior faeries. We go at it a few more times, and she isn’t able to catch me again. At the end, I do feel more of a kinship with her, as if fighting is a rite of passage into friendship.

She even gives me one of her small knives to fit in my boot. But I also know Kal saw her give it to me, perhaps an act of benevolence she wanted him to witness. I shrug off the annoyance and tuck the new knife away.

Not that I need a knife from her.

Kal actually has quite the armory in his house. That evening, he and Leto strap sword after sword and knife after knife into their holsters. Goody is outfitted too, in some of Kal’s old armor sewn smaller to fit him, with just a few blades. He still looks frail to me, but I remind myself of who he still is underneath, even though the world has tried to bury him.

That night at dinner, Leto updates us. “Father and I have discreetly spread the word. I know you’ll have strong support. The boys are back together again!” Kal’s face doesn’t share in the enthusiasm.

“The boys?” I have to know why Leto is so excited.

“Kal was a general alongside my father. But Father wasn’t the leader, and everyone knew it. Your savior here may be all soft and lovable now.” I scoff. If there is anything Kal is, it is not soft. “But he whipped the armada into wicked good shape. We were a tight crew. Stars, it was fun.”

“Mighty General Kalamaeus,” Min says, winking at me to say *I told you so*.

Kal’s face is drawn. “And then I left them.”

I feel the weight of his words. The others don’t fully understand, but I do.

He fled to survive, but he’s carried the guilt with him. I see some of his hardness then, his pain. He is ashamed, to have left his home and people. Ever the selfless leader, always putting everyone first, and he had to choose himself, choose to survive. He closes his eyes with a slow blink that wrecks me. I inch closer to him on the kitchen bench and loop my arm through his.

“Nah, Kal,” Leto assures him, “A mission’s a mission. You had yours.”

“So, we’ll have some of our forces. Do you think Aster will send some armada against Zellis as well?” Lana asks. *Aster!*

“He hasn’t responded to our inquiries—they were badly hit and are still recovering. And... it’s possible they are

organizing to retaliate here,” Leto warns.

Aster would attack Neymu? Dread pools in my gut. That is the absolute worst-case outcome, that Aster and Kal have to fight each other.

“Inquiries?” I gulp.

“Our father has tried to make contact to explain that Zellis went rogue. We didn’t mention the threat in the mountains, and I doubt Aster even knows of it.”

I feel a hint of relief.

“So in short, just us, Father, and the deserters, probably at least some of our elves,” Leto continues.

“What about hobbits?” I ask, as they are always left out of the equation, it seems.

“The hobbits in Neymu, and everywhere else, have all but died out,” Leto explains. “Only a handful in our armada, unfortunately. They’re great fighters.”

“What about...humans, tomorrow?”

Kal pulls his arm out from mine, squeezing me closer to him around my waist instead. “We won’t deploy any,” he tells me. Relief. And admiration.

“Not many left.”

“What?” I whisper as Kal also looks to his friend, surprised.

“Zellis didn’t let any of us near what he was doing, but I heard rumors he...experimented with our human battalions. Against the graglins...Not many survived.” A

current of new rage runs through me. Kal squeezes me again, exhaling with his own anger.

“So.” Leto reviews it all lightly. “We’ll have whatever fighters join us against Zellis, his armada, and whatever fresh horror he has up in those mountains instead of graglins. Kal leads the troops, with Father out front.”

Dramadus is a painter like Leto, I’ve learned, but can paint about ten minds at a time. In battle, he can make groups of soldiers turn on each other, flee, or stab themselves. Thus, he became the right hand of the king. Zaynr could manipulate the emotions of a whole battalion, and Dramadus could take down groups at a time by his side.

Leto goes on. “Goody and I behind him, Jaylyn and Stokker join with the archers.”

Kal cuts him off. “Stokker stays here.”

I’m surprised by this. It doesn’t feel right to just keep Stokker locked up here, unable to sift because of the wards, when we have no idea when we’ll be coming back. If the battle goes poorly, he could be trapped for years. And despite the rough beginning, he has started to feel like a friend.

“I’m not much with a bow without Stokker to help. He’ll fight with me, won’t you?”

Stokker nods. Kal sighs, considers, and nods once.

Leto continues. “Kal and Father, me and Goody, Jaylyn and Stokker join with the archers. Lana will guard our mighty healers and be at the ready to search the memories of the first few soldiers we capture. We get to Zellis, take him

down, Jay finds the orb, we take it out. Save the planet. Welton sings our praises for millennia.”

“Brilliant.” Welton is hopeful.

“We’re all going to die.” Eve is not.



That night Kal, and I make for our waterfall, our spirits heavy. We land and hold each other for a moment, embracing, watching the water. He stands behind me, locking me in one of his thick arms. I breathe in the scent of him as his other hand traces circles on my shoulder.

With the threats looming, I just breathe and think and feel. Feel him behind me, with me. He is home. He is safety. He is mine. And I am his, no matter what my chest says or feels. I know he is thinking of battle right now, his fighters, the heaviness from earlier. I long to comfort him.

“You had to leave, Kal. You didn’t have a choice.”

“There’s always a choice. I chose myself.”

“And if you hadn’t, I’d be dead. And so would Min and Goody.” I turn and look up at him. His face looks broken.

“There’s something I need to tell you.” He takes a breath, and I force myself to wait for his words to come. “Jay...the Fallows. There is no such place.” My heart begins to run away inside my frozen frame. *What? No.* He strokes my face. “I’ve been all over, every realm. I asked Goody, who is almost a thousand years old. And Lana and her spies. It... doesn’t exist.”

“So...they just...kill us.”

He pulls my head to his chest and breathes and lets me shudder. It has only been a few months since Grandfather’s ceremony. I wait for a surge of new grief, new anger. But it doesn’t come. Because I am not all that surprised. It makes sense. It makes perfect sense.

He rubs my back as he holds me tight.

“So while the fae live to be a thousand, humans are... ended at fifty, sixty, maybe seventy if very lucky. As soon as they can’t produce anymore.”

“It’s disgusting. They keep us so separated. I didn’t...I...I stayed away too long, stayed out of touch too long, in Neymu, at least, I could’ve tried to stop it, change it.”

I begin to really shake, filled with determination. My blood turns to fire. My fists clench, as does my jaw.

“Promise me,” I croak. Kal pulls back so I can look up as I implore him. “Promise me we... promise me *you* will change this world, Kal. That you’ll at least try.”

“I promise.” He searches my eyes, which are hard, and if I am honest with myself, unbelieving. Will he really deny his birthright and the power coursing through him to save my powerless, valueless species?

He can feel my doubt. “Jay. Every human I remember, everyone I see from now on...I see you. I see your father, your brothers, Welton...I promise. *We* will change it.” He holds my stare, fierce as ever, and I melt at his words.

He brings me to his chest until eventually my tears come, and he strokes my hair and kisses the top of my head until

they subside. Even with the new hatred and anguish cloaked around me, ever the silly girl, I think of Kal's words. Saying we like that. His fierce feelings for me. Someone else's mate.

"Kal...all these years...I mean, isn't finding your mate one of the most important things in the fae world?"

He caresses me with his fingers where they hold around my waist, "It is encouraged, especially for breeding, but time is different for us than humans. It can take hundreds of years."

"What if you have a mate out there and you find her one day, just browsing at the market?"

He almost smiles. "I won't go to the market." I huff, exasperated, and search his face, serious, even as he jokes.

He takes my whole head in his strong hands. "Jay, if my soul has a counterpart, it's yours." He doesn't let me interject. "No. No matter what else is tied to your soul, no matter what a table decrees or a priestess says. It's you, Jay. It's you." I lean into him, and he kisses me slowly, with care. I let my love—yes, real, deep love—for him radiate into his senses, pushing us from slow kisses to desperate ones.

Our time on the moss is bittersweet. I can't help but feel anxious, as if this is to be our last night together. He doesn't chastise me for being nervous, and I don't push him to talk about how tense he is. When we get back to the house, Kal asks me to join him in his bed. It reminds me of being wrapped in his wings by the fire in the middle of the Hakken. He sleeps soundly with me in his arms all night, and I don't utter Aster's name once.

CHAPTER 45

ASTER, ASTER, ASTER, Where are you?

The familiar pressure lands square on my being as we sift into Connestell. Kal holds his arm tightly around my waist and watches me squint through the feeling. He doesn't let go until I nod.

I open my eyes to see a snowy valley with giant sharp peaks reaching into the sky all around us. We've all added layers, but it isn't as windy or cold as I expected it to be, either by magic or the natural way of spring. The sky is so deeply blue and the peaks so white, I almost wish Welton could've come along to see it, instead of being sifted back to Raetown.

Until I spot Zellis's forces off in the distance.

Now we have to wait a few minutes before we charge into battle range, in hopes that Dramadus comes through with fighters.

I can't feel the orb's magic pulsing. I close my eyes and concentrate.

Nothing.

Kal looks to Leto. "So, how many do you think will follow you here? Twenty? Fifty?"

"More." Leto smiles and shakes his head, dismayed. "Kal, you were the greatest of us. In and out of battle. The people remember. The sentries aren't following me, mate. They're following you."

My heart swells with pride and love, and I hope Kal feels every ounce of it as I grab his hand.

Kal, unmoved, says, "If no one comes, we'll adjust positions, and Leto and I will hunt for Zellis alone."

Leto nods. But in a blink, at least thirty Neymu elves appear to our right, fully armed. Upon landing, they stand tall, spread their feet wide, and then stomp their feet back together, in perfect unison. Their quivers are massive and loaded down, I can feel, with magically charged arrows. Our band heaves a collective sigh.

To our right, closer to us, a group of hobbits appear, sifted in with an elf. There are only ten of them, but they looked formidable. I never would've guessed one hobbit could have so many clubs, axes and knives strapped onto his short body.

Then I hear them, and I squeeze Kal's hand. They are behind us, up high and blocked from our sight by a summit, a whole armada, it has to be.

Kal's armada.

In a perfect V formation, the fae warriors swoop low and prepare to land out in the valley ahead of us...at least five hundred massive, fully armed Soul sentries. Dramadus leads them down, and they land with a boom that reverberates off the mountainside.

Dramadus is out in front of the formation, and the ranks respond as he motions his hand up for them to come to attention, and then every hair on my body stands on its end as in unison, the entire legion of fighters kneels. The elves follow. Then the hobbits.

Leto just turns to Kal, bows slightly, and gives him a wide, gloating grin.

Kal steps forward, and I let go of his hand. He needs to command his legions alone, and I focus on feeling as much pride and love as I can muster. He glances at Eve, who comes up on his opposite side and touches his arm. He clears his throat, and I realize she has done something to amplify his voice.

“Thank you for your bravery. We fight for all of Loya today, against my fallen brother and his controlled forces.” He pauses. I know he hates having to give a speech, but blast if he doesn’t look incredible and sound perfect giving it.

Kal, the Commander.

“There was a time when the Dominion of the Soul was not only the most powerful kingdom, but also the most honorable.” He draws one of his swords from his back and begins to raise it. “Weakness and hatred stole that Neymu from us. Today, we fight to take it back.” He strikes his sword into the snow, and all the soldiers let out their battle cry. Proud, awed tears run familiar tracks down my cheeks.

I wonder how I could have contemplated leaving Kal’s side. Ever.

Dramadus approaches Kal through the cheers. “It looks that we’re almost equally matched, Your Highness. He may have a few hundred more. Scouts saw no graglins, no Zellis, no orb.”

Kal nods and gives him instructions to ready our troops into groups. We can hear the thump of Zellis’s soldiers,

already on the move towards us. Leto and Goody join the faeries, and Lana takes up her position in front of Min and Eve, who have moved to the back. Stokker is walking slowly towards the elves, everyone giving Kal and me some room.

Kal wraps his arms around me tight and claims me with his mouth. It isn't a goodbye kiss like before. His tongue is a promise.

To endure.

To return to me.

To make it through this. To come back to each other.

He pulls away and holds my head in his hands with that gaze, so intense the snow around me is surely melting. "Sun and moon and stars in my hands and now I'm the prick who's letting go."

I put my hands on his arms and squeeze. "I'm right behind you."

"Stay back for me. Stay calm for me."

"I will." He gives me another kiss, the firm, quick, goodbye variety that I hate, and then runs to join Dramadus at the front.

Stokker outfits me with a quill of charged arrows from the legion of elves. "You ready?" He asks me. I nod at him. "Then best of luck. I'm sorry."

"What?"

He's gone. At first opportunity, Stokker sifts away.

I am alone, in a battle.

I focus on staying calm and feeling the weight of the quiver on my back, the cold threatening my toes. Nothing to alert Kal to the anxiety I feel, that I misjudged someone *again*.

I have no idea where Stokker could have gone or whom he may be informing about us. But Aster is the most likely answer. *Aster! ASTER!* I fall in step with the elven group, complete strangers, no idea what to do next. I push away the fear.

Cold on my toes. Cold on my toes.

We have been marching ahead for maybe ten painfully tense minutes when I hear Kal give an order. He mounts to the sky, and half the faeries follow him. Some of Zellis's legions go airborne as well.

Then...

Chaos.

Elves and hobbits scream and run towards the battle lines in a blur all around me. I am frozen, searching the skies for Kal. There is no way I can tell which faerie blurring past is him. I give up my search and begin to run forward, hoping to feel the orb and see Kal when he makes landfall again. I look back on my way into the fray, seeing Lana and her charges following slowly and safely, far behind us.

The armada starts crashing down from the air, as I saw Kal do with Leto.

Except it is all wrong.

They aren't landing, they are just falling.

And Zellis's sentries with them aren't even interested in flying, they are just trying to dismember their opponents.

Just like the graglins.

My blood turns to ice.

The Soul fae are under the orb's control.

Hundreds of fairies, much stronger than graglins, more skilled—*and able to fly!*—are under Zellis's control. I notice then, because I look for it—their eyes are clouded, and they move like wild animals, feral and determined. There is no honor in their fight. They slash with swords, but their main objective is to pull limbs and heads.

Horror grips my feet like the snow on my boots, and I try to fight it. Try to keep moving. *ASTER!* pulls at me in the surge of fear. I searched for Kal and eventually see him land, screaming, "To the ground! To the ground! Heads! Heads!"

As he screams, his voice still amplified, he starts the bloodbath. With a quick slash of his two swords, he beheads any dazed sentry who comes near him. But Zellis's forces swarm, always two or three to one of Kal's. Goody sticks close to Kal and Dramadus, launching fireball after fireball, faster than I've ever seen him throw.

Hobbits are taking the worst of the assault, two already down. It takes all the might of two or three hazed graglins to take down a faerie, but it takes nothing for one spelled fae to dismantle a hobbit. There is already blood covering the snow everywhere I look. I try not to see the arms, hands and legs, lying in disarray on the snow.

The elves are loosing efficient arrows, but only an arrow shot directly into the head, through the front hole of the helmets, will take its mark down. A few spelled sentries have made it to their ranks and are starting to take elves down one by one.

I can make out Leto, advancing steadily but bleeding badly on one side.

Where is Dramadus with his power? I see him off to my left, but sentries approach him as if he has no magic at all. Their eyes are clouded, as are the eyes of all the other opponents on the field.

Their minds.

Their minds are clouded.

Which must mean Dramadus can't get inside them.

We are going to lose.

I am still at the very back edge of the battle, and I consider trying to load my bow...but the orb. The orb is more important. I search with my eyes and my mind, but there is nothing. I am about to sift—a risk, since I am still new to it and it will take much of my energy—when I spot Zellis.

He sifts in near Kal in the middle of the valley. He isn't wearing any armor, just breezing in like he has not a care in the world. I run towards him. I have to see if I can sense the orb with Zellis, on his body. Soon I am within earshot. I slow down and stay back, calm. *My feet are freezing, my feet are freezing.*

“Aren’t they incredible, brother? My orbs? Look at what we can do. Graglins, faeries, elves, I can control them all! No one can defy me!” Kal is fighting off two sentries, trying to get to his brother. Two more, seemingly at Zellis’s unspoken command, charge at him.

“You’ll ruin us all Zellis, stop this!”

“Oh, Kalamaeus, you’ve ruined your little band of deserters, that’s for certain. Traitors who deserve to die out here. When will you show them your secret? You could finish this all right now. Half-blood filth,” he spits. “Father’s bastard prize. What a fool. *I* am the firstborn. *I* am the prize.”

Kal screams as he fights off the swarm around him, “Then come fight me yourself!”

“No, I would never beat you your way. That’s why I always win. My battle is in the mind.” He gestures wide. “*All* of the minds.”

“You can rule without this, brother!”

“Perhaps, but I won’t. Soon you will have to reveal your strength to save them, and then you’ll be as good as dead. I shall enjoy watching. Goodbye, little brother.”

Then Zellis sifts, just as Goody makes an impressive, huge fire bear. It runs to help Kal, Goody’s arms raised with control, in concentration. It is helping, thank Creator, to slow the soldiers around Kal.

From the side, a sentry breaks through and stabs Goody straight in the stomach, then grabs onto his limbs. I scream Goody’s name as *ASTER!* screams back at me. I know Kal heard me, felt me.

With a wave of rage, there is no more doubt.

In this moment, I have no more fear.

No more feelings.

I saw, just barely, where Zellis jumped to on the far edge of the battlefield, his chosen spot to survey the action. I am without questions or worries now. Just the knowledge of what must be done. I have to follow. I have to find the orb and save Kal and our friends. And quickly.

I sift in Zellis's direction, about half the distance between us. As soon as I get within his line of sight, he sifts again. I sift again after him, to the edge of valley, where he just stood. I am panting from the strain, but I can feel the orb now. I can feel it in every cell of my body.

Kal sees me across the battlefield. "No Jay! Jaylyn! No!" His scream fills the entire valley.

I hope he can sense my clarity, my conviction. *No fear, Kal. Trust me. No fear.*

I take in a deep breath but keep my eyes open, searching. *Where is it? Where is it?*

Left. A cave.

I sift to the opening of the cave. I ready myself to evade Zellis if he appears. The sifting does wear on me, but adrenaline builds with each step. I cannot, must not, will not be touched.

I trust my quick instincts to save me as I step into the opening and down into the crevice of a walkway. It is dark and wet and frigid, and my mind flashes to the dungeon, but I push the memory away.

I can see a source of light ahead. The orb, it must be. *Deep breaths. Clear my mind. Keep moving my feet.*

Soon the cave opens up, and with another turn I am in a gargantuan cavern seemingly the size of the mountain itself. The ledge I find myself on leads to a steep drop off, with a dome carved out of the mountain above my head.

The closer I step, the better I can see that the cavern is incredibly deep as well. In the center of the cavern out ahead, a thin shard of stone stands like a pillar, a podium, and on it sits the large glass orb.

The magical sphere is glowing so bright, I have to shield my eyes. Not only is it glaring, but it also throws white-blue lightning strikes around the room, crackling with power. I have to squint, but I keep moving forward. Zellis could appear at any moment.

There is no platform around the cavern, no path to walk across. The lightning blasts are almost constant, too frequent for Kal or Leto to come in and fly to it—they'd be hit.

Forward. I keep moving.

The full scope comes into view. The sparks hit the ceiling and come down, bouncing back and forth between spindles. The small spikes are evenly spaced around the room, circling in from the wall to the podium. They make rings around the giant space, circling closer and closer right to the orb, but they are far apart and only about the size of Kal's hand.

I concentrate on the small edge of stone that makes a podium around the orb and try to sift. I move my foot, but

nothing. Either I am too spent, too weak, or the space is warded against sifting.

I look back at the spindles. They seem to absorb or direct the power, without giving enough footing to be used as a way across. Not enough footing for a normal human or faerie, maybe.

But I am not normal.

Clear my mind. Clear my mind.

The first spindle is much farther down and out from me than I thought. And if I can't sift, I may not have my powered agility either.

"Well, well, well." Zellis's voice.

Now! I have to move, powered or not. I focus on my feet and the spindle nearest me. I will have to land on one foot and remain balanced. Zellis is nearing. It is suicide, but closer still he comes, and I have no alternative. I think of Kal and Leto and Min and Goody, and I jump.

I land on my one foot but have to flail my arms and legs. I clench my abdomen as hard as I can. Terror threatens my concentration. Lightning could strike me at any moment.
Clear my mind.

I close my eyes and feel around me. Only me and the orb and the room and my foot. Then I focus on the rhythm.

Wave of power, lightning strike, two strikes.

If I concentrate, can I anticipate where the strikes would be? No. *Blast.* I will have to trust the rhythm and my feet and move during the waves.

Wave, strike, double strike, I push off with my right foot and land on the next spindle with my left. I freeze, wobbling just a bit. Strike, two strikes. Leap.

Two more and I will be there.

Wait, leap, freeze.

Wait, leap, and I stumble onto the middle rock podium. It is just wide enough for my two feet to straddle the stone's cradle.

I hear shuffling in the distance as Zellis flees or fights or tries to come after me, but I don't look back. There is nothing else. Just to destroy this orb.

I am not scared in my mind, but my body remembers how badly the last orb hurt. It was about the size of my hand, and the one before me is bigger than my head. What if I touch it and I instantly die? I didn't die last time. It was just pain. I've inhaled pain before, absorbed it all, and I can do it again.

Kal.

I feel all my love for him, I let it well up huge and happy and strong, and I grab the orb.

Torture gashes me open, starting with my hands.

It is much worse. Much worse than the turning, than the first orb. It is hotter, sharper.

I scream and weep and shake as I shove as hard as I can. I am on fire in every cell. Sharp blades of pain shred my every nerve. Not just my hands, even the heels of my feet and the tips of my ears. My eyelids are being seared. My stomach is being hollowed out with a dull sword. I am

going to die of all the power and pain. *Let it in. Let it in.* I push and push, but it feels as though the orb is molded right to the stone. But it can't be.

Let it in, Jaylyn.

I think I vomit. Maybe I relieve myself. Maybe I'm still screaming. I smell blood. But I just let it in.

I think. The breeding centers. The Fallows. The table. The tie I don't want. Kal, the tie I long for. I tilt my head back, and with all that I am, I push again.

The orb falls. I am struck by lightning as it goes, still pulsing down to the bottom. I collapse on top of the podium, letting myself die. I register the flash below through almost closed eyes and hear the crack as the orb shatters. The bomb of light and power goes through the room, through my veins again. My clothes are singed, my fingernails have curled and the knife in my boot has melted to become one with my skin.

Then it is over.

I go numb with exhaustion, but I also know in the recesses of my mind that I need to survive, that I have to hold onto the podium. As I cling there, I can feel sparks running along my limbs. I am a starlight lamp come to life, and current is snapping and crackling all over me.

I try with everything I have to hold on to the stone, but I have nothing left. I feel myself fall back, still charged all over with lightning, as my feet slip off the platform.

I fall and fall and hit what I am sure is my death.

Not my death.

Kal.

Kal is carrying me. He followed me, caught me before I hit the bottom.

I feel him land softly and shush me, wiping my hair away with his hand.

I push open my eyes and there he is, beautiful and bloody and covered in cold, wet mud.

“Kal,” my voice cracks. He gathers me up and holds me tight. Then he leans my head up and kisses me passionately, like we’ve been apart for ages.

“Shhh.” He stares into my eyes, and I hear it, in my mind.

KAL KAL KALAMAEUS! I AM YOURS AND YOU ARE MINE

I let out a sob.

I’ve done it. Finally. I cut my tie with Aster. The magic has washed him away. It is just as I hoped. My soul now knows whose I am, whom I love, and who is mine.

“I’ve got you,” Kal says. And he kisses me with vigor again.

I kiss him back as best I can through the exhaustion.

He grabs me, a clutch filled with desire, and I cling to him.

My true soulmate.

It is everything I want, put right at last.

And then I hear a rhythm.

Faint. Subtle...a pulse. A beat. I look up.

It looks like Kal, smells like him, his eyes are gleaming with the love I know.

But it isn’t Kal.

I feel the beat now. This is a painting. It has to be.

This is Zellis. I am in Zellis's arms.

Disgust roils up, but I push it down. I need to shut him out. I focus on his magic pulse.

But.

If I shut him out, he will know I've discovered his presence in my consciousness. He could sift me away or take flight with me. He is here, right now, in my reach. I can do something, here and now with him in my grasp. I have to stay in his painting.

With bile rising, I kiss him as passionately as I can and adjust my body. As I move, he groans in ecstasy. I fight the nausea and grab hold of the knife at my boot. It is in my skin, embedded like a fine gem on a gold bracelet. And I should feel the pain of ripping it free, but I have already lived pain.

I am pain.

There is no more fear. I keep kissing as he begins exploring me with his hands, moving with him to position my knife. He looks so real, my mind falters. My mind doesn't want me to do this. My heart breaks. But this is not Kal. It is not Kal. I pull away.

"Oh, Kal," I give him my dreamy tavern smile.

And I stab him in the heart.

He becomes Zellis instantly, stuttering and choking. His eyes are wide with shock, but I know he will heal soon. The knife is not enough. I grab a magic arrow from my quill and stab him in the eye. I grab a second and stab his second eye,

screaming again. I grab another ready to try his neck, but he slumps over. He's done. I shudder and catch my breath. I still feel power and light coursing through me.

When I come back to my senses after a couple deep breaths, I turn to see the cavern. Sentries are down all around me, beheaded. Four or five of them and...and Kal. My Kal, the real Kal, is on the ground in a pool of blood.

"Min!" I scream as loud as I can. "Eve! Leto!" I put my hands on his chest, but there is more than one wound. I am not sure where to put the pressure. Eve and Leto rush in and join me, kneeling next to him.

"Eve!" Eve puts her hands on him and looks me in the eyes.

"He's already gone."

"No. No, no, no, no, no, no." I put my head on his chest to hear his heart. I don't hear its thumping. But I feel something. His magic or his power or something has a faint beat somewhere in his soul.

"Eve, get ready to heal him."

"Love, he's gone I can't—"

"Just get ready! Please!"

I feel the crackle of electricity still in my veins. It sparked along my shoulders and through my cells after the orb blew apart.

Kal shocked his house back to life during an outage with just a small spark.

I have no way of knowing if his power or his heart will work the same way, but I have to try. Like the water in the

forest, I imagine the light in me gathering up, in my arm. Then into my hand. I pull the light from me in my imagination and sparks start to fly all over my right hand. Concentrating, I pulse a quick shot of blue sparks at my leg. It burns a deep hole, and I cry out.

Too much. I pulse a shot at my other leg. Just a small charge.

I put my hand on Kal's chest and feel for his pulse. It is faint. *One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.* Filled with anguish and determination and a sliver of hope, I pulse my sparks.

I put my head on his chest. I hear a heartbeat far away, then another. I try to feel my love for him so strongly, my determination, to channel them down into his soul.

He has to feel me and come back.

He has to.

I shock him again. Three beats.

"Eve, listen, his heart!" Then I shock him again, and I hear it. Beating. Fully, slowly.

Relief, love, missing him, needing him. I try to scream at him with my emotions. *I need you Kal, come back to me!*

"I've got it! I've got him! I've got him!" Eve cries out in surprise with one hand on his arm.

Leto puts his arms around me as I let out a sob and collapse onto Kal's chest.

"Zellis. Be sure he's dead." Leto nods in understanding and leaves us.

“I’ve got him, Jaylyn. I’ve got him,” Eve says again.

I don’t know if she means for me to back up or leave, but I will be doing neither.

I wrap my arms around his middle and just listen to his heartbeat growing stronger. As soon as I hear it strong and steady, knowing he’ll be all right, adrenaline releases me from its grip. With it, my mind is left to relax, to fall into darkness.

The last thought I have is an irritating hint, a scent in the breeze of my mind, of *Aster*.

CHAPTER 46

Stone.

Pippy flowers.

Honey. Spice.

Aster.

I come back to myself with a fleeting pang, a shot of terror for Kal, and a small wave of light, sparkling joy.

“Oh, brave Jaylyn. You’re up! You’re up! Our Mighty Warrior Queen!”

I try to sit upright. I am in a grand bed, suited for mighty wings, in a large, dark room. The floors and walls are black stone. We are...back in Nalamar, in the palace.

I expect to feel the oppressive weight of the dark palace, but light filters in through the window, and the bed and furniture are in lighter grays and purples. And green pippy flowers are in vases throughout the room. I feel rested, though a little achy.

“Not a queen, Min. Are you all right?”

Happiness. “Oh, yes, not a scratch.”

“Where’s—”

Kal bursts into the room before I can say his name. A happiness washes over me—and calm. It is unexpected and confuses me, these feelings on top of feelings. Then I feel confusion along with all the worry.

“What? What is it?” He sits next to me, arm around me, gentle, as if I am still in a lot of pain. Strangely, I’m not.

“I don’t know...I feel strange.” Waves of worry now. So much of it, I cough, choking on thick air. I take a breath. Kal’s face is tight as his eyes search mine.

“I’m all right though, I’m okay.” Relief passes over all of us as Min makes her way out the door.

“We’re in the palace?” I ask him, trying to sort many questions.

“Yes. Just for now.”

“You...did you?”

“No, I didn’t have to. No one knows.” Thank Creator. I was sure he’d have to strike his lightning to end all that horror.

“They know about *you*, though.” He smiles a small smile at me, and I remember him, dead before me. I shudder as I look into his eyes.

“You came back to me,” I whisper.

“Of course I did.”

I wrap my arms around him and just breathe in his scent for a moment. The battle keeps playing through my mind like one of Kal’s scenes.

“Goody?”

“Alive but shaken. Hasn’t spoken.”

Sadness washes over me. Mixed with a shame I don’t understand.

“Zellis?”

“Dead.” He knows I will keep asking about every single person. “We lost a lot of fighters, but our friends are fine, either fully healed or resting.”

“And you’re sure Zellis didn’t tell anyone about you?”

“He was saving it, I think. He liked to scheme that way. I haven’t felt any suspicion from anyone.”

I nod. “How long was I out?”

“Only a day. Eve says you’re stronger than ever.” His face lights up. “I cannot wait to see you train.”

“So, what now?”

He sighs. “Jay, there’s so much to do. The elves are terrified and furious, no one fully trusts me. Most of the court is with us but not all...And you were right about the humans. Those are slave camps down there.”

Anger and determination and worry and sadness. All at once.

He gathers me into his cradling arms in the way that I love. *Home*. Warmth and peace crash through all the other emotions. “We will install someone. I’ll find the right lord. Someone who’ll change it all, starting here, in Neymu.”

I look up at his gorgeous face, and for a second, I think of his face when it had been Zellis, his face as I stabbed him. I shake.

“Zellis...”

“I saw. I knew what he was doing, that you saw me in your mind. I was trying so hard to get to you, but...” His voice cracks, and he squeezes me tight.

“He didn’t try to stop me, though, not really. He could’ve put up more of a fight to save the orb. Why did he just sit there like that, as you?”

“You were more valuable as a hostage, to torment me, because—”

I remember what his brother said on the battlefield. “Because there are more orbs.”

“Yes. Likely seven, one in each kingdom, to use spelled legions to conquer the whole star one realm at a time. And maybe if we find and crush the rest, starlight will be restored. It’s failing faster now.”

“The orbs are causing it?”

He frowns. “That’s just one theory. Though it doesn’t completely make sense because when we destroy them, the magic energy released back into the atmosphere is huge. I also don’t believe these orbs are as old as the starpower problem.”

Confusion. Worry. Hunger. Amusement. Why am I amused?

Kal sifts us to a dark kitchen, where we sit just as we did on the bed, but on the shining black floor in front of a small table. “Min, let’s eat!” he calls out.

Joy and peace.

Kal pulls me to my feet as Min comes in, waving dishes that smell amazing. Kal sifts to get Goody, who is with us but without the smile in his eyes. We sit and eat and laugh, almost just as if we are back on our beach.

It is happiness upon happiness, sitting at that table. But the feeling is strange, strong, like in our little enclosed ocean of joy, new waves of feeling keep crashing over me.

We let Min tell and retell our adventure. I learn from her that Kal fought his way out to follow me, sifted to the cave and those sentries followed him. No one else could get away to help.

She marvels at our bravery and might again, adding in her thoughts about how powerful our future children will be. Which washes me in splashes of embarrassment and worry. As we sit at the table, I can feel new rhythms around me, as if feeling many heartbeats—power beats? Magic beats?—at once. It is...new. New powers. Was Kal alive when the orb broke?

“The orb...have you tried your powers, Kal?”

Kal gives a sneaky grin and suddenly turns the kitchen into the pippy field. The small wood table and benches sit in the mass of colorful happy dancers. The images are crystal clear, this time, even the wind and the smell.

There would be no way to know it wasn't real if I hadn't just asked him. It is thrilling...and scary. I feel wonder and fear around us. We are back in the kitchen, and he looks at me, wary.

“I can feel emotions even more. Stronger, clearer,” he adds. I groan. I feel worry and shame and uncertainty.

“And...” He looks at me and puts his hand on mine. Calm washes over me, completely. There are no other emotions or thoughts. Calm and only calm. When he removes his hand, it vanishes.

My eyes go wide with awe. And fresh fear. He has a hint of his father's terrible power, to make me—make others—feel what he wants.

“I found out by accident working with Min...Jay,” he says, looks at me so sure, and also afraid, pleading. “I will never do that to you again.”

I take a deep breath and nod. “So...I suppose I should begin training for the other six orbs straightaway.” I sigh. But he doesn’t respond with the glee I was expecting.

“I need your help in court...all the talking. I’m pitiful.”

Min disagrees, though she hasn’t been in the throne room. She has been getting to know every servant in the palace, all already her closest friends, I am sure. That and trying to get Goody to chat with her, go for walks, say his two words.

Our foursome is splitting up, which I should have known was inevitable. And training will have to wait. We aren’t alone in the forest anymore. We aren’t on the beach in the easy sunshine. As the conversation dwindles, Kal catches me looking around the kitchen. Uncertainty and disgust and shame and all kinds of feelings pulse through me.

“Zellis is gone. We’re safe here,” he says softly.

“I know, it’s just so dark. All black everything.” I grimace. Kal cocks his head, then gets up. He takes the steps up to the wall beside us, considering.

“It’s all the wards. Father kept adding layers.”

Kal puts two hands on the wall and braces himself like he is going to push the wall down. The whole room begins to shake and groan. Kal grunts, and the deep black of the walls and floor start to pull away, as if being washed off.

All the muscles in Kal's back bulge, and he cries out, pushing through to the end. The last of the black leaves like it's just slipped down a drain. What remains is a dark grey stone with flecks of silver and gold and streaks of deep purple. It sparkles, catching all the lamplight.

It is absolutely beautiful.

I feel a twinge of exhaustion and happiness as I look to Kal.

His chest is heaving from the work, glistening with sweat. Desire for him blooms up from deep inside, in an instant. When I lock eyes with him the feeling explodes, doubling, tripling. Kal's eyes widen, and he has to brace himself on the wall. I stand with such force I move the whole table.

"Goodnight, all," Kal blurts out as we run to each other. The second we touch he has me sifted back to his bedroom and up in his arms.

In his low, garbled voice he says, "I will have to break a sweat for you more often." As he moves us to the bed, I see the walls are lighter in this room as well.

"You did that to the whole castle?" I am shocked anew at the strength of him. In the waves of desire and happiness, I feel a wave of pride and a stab of hurt at my words.

I am going absolutely insane. Something is amiss.

Worry. Worry and fear.

"What? Jay?" He sets me down so I am standing in his embrace. His heart thunders, and the worry grows.

"It's you," I tell him. Confusion. Worry.

I smile. "I can feel you. You're worried." Confusion and surprise.

"How..." Awe and admiration, still some worry.

I can feel Kal's feelings.

It thrills me. I realize with a rush of heat what just happened in the dining room. I needed him, and when he sensed my feelings, I in turn felt his need for me.

Excitement washes through my body down into my curled toes. I let my desire overtake any and all other emotions. Kal lets out a shudder, and it is blinding, then, only wanting each other. Need and happiness and such explosive love, I think we could combust.

As that explosive moment draws near, Kal actually does spark. Flickers of light jump along his shoulders and the tops of his wings as he moves inside me. I put my hands on his chest and the sparks came down and met my own, now traveling up my arms. Our sparks join, making flashes of a new white-blueish-purple color.

We laugh and flicker and feel joy that can't be put into words. I arch my back as he thrusts harder, the sparks growing all around us. And the feelings are powerful, total, and only ours. They can't ever be understood by anyone but us, a made star, and a half-blood, blocking out any darkness, any fear, any doubt with our own light.

We burn Kal's room to cinders, over and over again.

When we lay together in the bliss, a thought of Aster passes through, uninvited. It is quick and quiet, but guilt stabs me. I feel ashamed and angry that I can't overcome the tie for Kal. And I feel his subtle worry and anger,

irritation. It settles into anxiety, both of us just very worried for each other.

Kal sighs.

I squeeze him and quickly think only of pippy flowers and moss beds and all the wonderful things I can. My happiness melts away his doubts, and we are back in a cocoon of crackling bright joy.



In the two days that follow, Kal goes to work in the throne room. He doesn't sit on the throne but instead brings in a long table and meets with seemingly all of Neymu's lords, elves, and even a few hobbits. He brings in the human governors as well, which wrecks me. They are so thin and pale and broken.

It is great practice for me to sit and feel so many emotions around me. They are all faint, just hints of feelings. I learn how to decipher which feelings belong to whom. Kal's feelings are always the strongest next to my own, but his aren't overwhelming like they were at first. And I shouldn't be shocked that most of the time he feels very little. He is deep in thought, engaged in listening.

Dramadus, Leto, Lana, and I sit with him, though my presence is odd at times. It is highly unusual for a made faerie to be in the throne room at all, let alone as a trusted advisor. But Kal doesn't care at all what anyone thinks, and since no one knows of my new reading abilities, he

appreciates having me with him. No one will try to guard their thoughts and feelings against me the way they would against him and the other members of Kal's court.

Dramadus and Leto have lead walls around them. Lana also hides her feelings well, but she slips from time to time. I feel flashes of her affection when she looks at Kal. I also sense her jealousy and uncertainty with me. I even felt desire from her one time, when Kal stood and stretched between meetings. I almost shot lightning at her throat, and Kal grinned a thoroughly annoying grin at me in response.

Aside from Lana, I start to sense hints of who is probably lying or at least hiding something during our court discussions. It is exhausting and makes me admire Kal all the more.

He is so strong in so many ways.

He shifts into commanding mode as necessary but even then is patient and kind. He doesn't speak much at all, unsurprisingly, but when he does, he has valuable questions and suggestions. He gathers reports from sentries and sends messengers to check in with the other Kingdoms. He sends spies to search for the remaining orbs.

He defers to Dramadus often, despite my initial protests, relying on the advisor's wisdom with no insecurity at all. Dramadus looked so severe and dark at Zellis's table, but really everyone did. He respects Kal and even feels pride, I am fairly sure, as if he sees the treasure in him that Zaynr missed. Though Dramadus is much older and arguably more powerful, at least in his Soul powers, he has made it clear that Kal is in command of Neymu.

After those two days of watching it all, watching Kal, I know the truth of it.

Those who don't want to rule are often best fit to do so.

This gentle giant of mine doesn't want the power, and so he is the best one to wield it. His kingdom needs him. Beyond that, Loya needs him. He could lead us in change, just as he promised.

That evening after dinner, Kal and I stand on a balcony overlooking the sea. The sun has just made its final descent, leaving the sky brilliant and saturated. I glance at him, my sentry, glowing in the warm pink light. He senses that I want to tell him something.

"Kal." I steel myself. "You need to be king." He starts to shake his head, but I push on. "Your kingdom needs you. The humans below need you. No one will rule as well as you." I can barely feel him start to concede, rippling with pride and warmth at my praise.

I falter on the next part, to say it so plainly. We haven't even talked of marriage. In fact, neither of us have actually used the word *love* aloud. We are still so new.

"But you can't take me as your queen." He scoffs but I persist. "Your advisors, the other kingdoms, all the things we have to do—they won't take you seriously, won't respect you and the new world we want to build, Kal. Your court, the High Council, it will never allow it. Beyond my tied soul—another valid objection, I might add—you can't take a made, fake faerie as your bride."

He is determined, happy and sure. And confident.

His deep blue eyes sparkle as he takes me in his arms,
arms that he lets spark with light.

“Let them try and stop me.”

EPILOGUE

Welt,

Yes, I do love these enchanted letters, and yes, I do miss you terribly. In fact, we are set to travel to each kingdom in search of the orbs soon, which means I'll be coming home. And coming in very close contact with you-know-who.

He knows where I am. He also knows I'm now a member of Kal's court, that we worked together to take down Zellis. He must know we're...together. Yet, in these past weeks he hasn't sent word. I assume he is busy as the new king, if Kal's new life is any guide to go by.

But since he hasn't made any moves, not yet launched an attack against Neymu, or thanked us for saving his kingdom, or announced who his new queen will be, Kal is tense.

It is possible Aster is letting the High Council deal with us, since, oh yes, we are going to have to face them too. An official inquiry. Pray to Creator for all of us. If I display too many emotions, which you know is likely, I fear my Prince—King!—of Souls will lose his temper and kill, well, everyone. Just stabbing people right and left across the planet in a fit of rage.

Which would be inconvenient, because we need to meet with each court to discuss the remaining orbs. And the starlight. Still, no one has any clue why we lose a little more power every day. Kal thinks that's why all seven realms are just waiting, holding their breath and calling all of this an ancient feud between Zanyr and Arian, instead of launching

their own preventative measures against graglins and Neymu.

I am pushing Kal to use our upcoming journey to each kingdom to bring up new laws for humans and Placement as well, but we will have to see how agreeable each king is. Plus, saving the whole planet seems like a smart first step towards saving humans. So I am trying to be patient. (No comment necessary.)

Thank you so much for helping Mother and the boys clean up the cottage in all the aftermath. I will have to get you a lute that plays itself! Just you wait! Kal is searching to find out about my father too—thanks for trying. I'll let you know if we hear anything.

Yes, it is a wonder to feel Kal's feelings, but it is difficult too. So often he is frustrated with me and my pestering about my big goals for Loya. He works in his court all day and is spent by the time evening arrives.

But his advisors and allies are growing to love him. They've already insisted on a coronation, which is wonderful news. We are pushing to delay his installment until after all the orbs have been found. He will be the best king, Welton, even better than Arian was.

I don't enjoy court. I know when I'm not present, members of his council discuss me, the impropriety of my presence at his side, and his need for a proper queen. He hasn't said anything, and I haven't dared to bring it up with him again.

It is an adjustment, life in the palace, in contrast to our time alone in the wilderness. He's weighed down, tired. Funny we seem more tired here in court on our bums than we were carrying Min and Goody through the forest.

Our affection for each other remains strong, but I worry about the heaviness of all these new responsibilities. I wonder if we can bear all that lies ahead. We are not a girl and her sentry alone in the countryside anymore, that is certain.

Which is why I'm ready to venture out! I can't wait to see you!

Leto has requested you enclose yet another new verse about him in your reply.

And please revise the verse about Lana the Lovely or I shall strike you to ash.

Love,

Jay



Jaylyn's story continues in *With The Winds*. Can't wait to read on? Get the first few chapters of *With The Winds* now: kelseyhumphreys.com/loya/bonus

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a rating or review online right now before, if you're like me, you close this book and immediately forget everything you just read. Thank you so much for reading!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Can you tell I wrote this book while dealing with big emotions? After suffering through major life changes and multiple losses, and while trying to be patient through the adoption process, this book, my first novel ever, poured out of me in two weeks. I was also training for my first—and only—half marathon and giving up sugar and honestly crying a lot. But I was becoming more and more disciplined, and I poured my feelings out into our heroine.

All that was almost two years ago! In fact, I was so intimidated by the idea of publishing it, that during that time I wrote and published six light-hearted, best-selling—even profitable, a new word to this creator—Romcom novels. A new kind of procrastination, to be sure. I hope you can tell this story has been lovingly rewritten and edited multiple times.

After many, *many* creative failures, it seems I have found my “sparks” in writing. **If you are someone with a million ideas and a graveyard of purchased URLs and reserved Instagram names, with a shame closet stuffed with products and supplies for one of your past endeavors, you are not alone.** Let my writing success inspire you to keep trying new things!

I have a few thank-yous, the first of which is always to Jesus for my salvation, my sobriety, and my creativity.

My second thank-you will always be to Christopher, my high school sweetheart, and the inspiration for all my hot, sweet fictional men. He read my very rough first draft of this book, while I sat and watched him read like a creep, and afterward slowly turned to me and said, “Why haven’t you been writing novels all along?”

SWOON! I am so very lucky.

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To new readers who just discovered me when I published my Romcoms, or this new fantasy series, thank you for taking a chance on a new author! I *live* for your posts about my books!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kay Humphreys is the fantasy pen name for stand-up-comedian-turned-novelist Kelsey Humphreys. After tens of millions of video views, Humphreys has captured her hilarious, heartwarming characters in book form. Her steamy stories dig into deep truths about love, identity, purpose, and family. When she's not writing romance or creating comedy videos, she's reading, running, mom-ing and wife-ing in Oklahoma.

Ask your local bookstore to host her for one of the most fun—and funny—book signing events you'll ever attend!

Follow her funny posts on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok

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The Heartlanders, Humphreys' bestselling contemporary romantic comedy series featuring the swoony love stories of the Canton family, is available now!

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