



RAGE OF HER RAVENS

COURT OF FAE AND FIRELIGHT

III

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
TARA WEST

Table of Contents

[Rage of Her Ravens | Court of Fae and Firelight Book Three | By Tara West](#)

[Dedications](#)

[Part One | Deception, Fate, and Flames of Rage | Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Rage of Her Ravens | Part Two | By Tara West | Revelations, Omens, and Apparitions | Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Hungry for Her Wolves | Hungry for Her Wolves, Book One | A Reverse-Harem Paranormal Romance | Tara West](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Books by Tara West](#)

[About Tara West](#)

[Court of Fae and Firelight Glossary](#)

Rage of Her Ravens

Court of Fae and Firelight Book Three

By Tara West

Copyright © 2023 by Tara West

Published by Shifting Sands Publishing

First edition, published October 2023

All rights reserved.

This book is protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America. Any reproduction or other unauthorized use of the material or artwork herein is prohibited.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

Artwork by Trifbookdesign.com

Edits by Jade Taggart

She seeks solace. They want vengeance. How can she save the world while consumed by the fire?

My life has become a shell of the one I once knew after losing my other half, my dear twin sister. Before she was killed in a bear attack, I made her two promises—to raise her twin daughters as if they were my own, and to protect them with my life. Until now, I've kept those promises.

When the wicked Fae Queen Malvolia sends three winged fire mages to hunt us, I'm faced with an impossible choice—kill them or let them take us hostage. Killing them would be too easy, for I'm gifted with the magic of the siren's call, and with my powerful voice, I can bring entire armies to their knees and watch while they slit their own throats. Unfortunately, these mages are my fated mates, tasked to coerce me to join Malvolia's army.

And there's one more problem. Rumors are circulating that my twin is not dead, that she's grown into a powerful white witch, and she's marching with Malvolia's enemy to destroy us.

Dedications

To my husband, for believing in me.

Jade, I'm so glad I found you. Thank you for making my book better!

Amanda, Cheryl, Joy, Sheri, thank you for your feedback!

Susan, thank you for the deep, developmental feedback and for always pointing out plot holes. Your observations are priceless!

Part One

Deception, Fate, and Flames of Rage

Chapter One

Flora Avias

55 years earlier

I skipped across the smooth marble stones through my sister's private garden like a sprite being carried on a breeze, my heart feeling lighter than the wispy clouds overhead, though it had grown thrice in size just this past week. I had found my fated mates, two handsome dukes, and I was in love.

I spied my sister taking tea by her fishpond, a backdrop of crimson, thorny roses behind her. Two fire mages stood as still as statues beside the bushes, their red cloaks blending in with the flowers. Ever the serious queen, my sister was dressed in her court attire, a flowing crimson gown with a silver embroidered bodice and stomacher that appeared so stiff and tight, I wondered how my twin was able to breathe.

My sister's mage, Selig, sat with her, an equally serious expression carved into his thin face, his long, black beard curling around his teacup before cascading into his lap. I inwardly laughed, knowing my sister was probably mortified by her disheveled mage. No doubt there were curly hairs embedded in the silk tablecloth and floating in her tea. Selig shed like a mangy mongrel.

I waved to my sister when she looked up, shielding her eyes against the midmorning sun with a silk fan. "Mal!"

Her eyes widened, and so did her smile. "Flora!" She pushed back her chair with stiff arms, her gown restricting her movements.

I picked up my skirts and ran to her, ignoring Selig's snicker of disapproval when I flung myself into Malvolia's arms, laughing as we kissed and hugged.

Malvolia pulled back, clutching my shoulders. Though we were identical twins, it felt as if I was looking at a stranger. She'd caved to court pressure and donned their strange fashions. She wore her chestnut hair in austere braids on the

sides of her head like coiled snakes, barely visible through the black veil that was secured by her ruby and diamond tiara, the same one I remembered our mother wearing before the Dark Tide had taken her from us. My sister's face had been painted chalky white and then stained with red rouge high up on her cheekbones. Her brows had been plucked so thin, they were nothing more than slashes of ink. She reminded me of the porcelain dolls we played with as children.

She dug her nails into my shoulders, desperation reflecting in her eyes. "Is it true?"

I swallowed back a knot of apprehension as the heat from her fingers seeped into my skin, reminding me her fire was far more lethal than the strongest fire mage. "It is."

Her lips twisted ever so slightly as she looked over my shoulder. "Where are they?"

"They're staying in my chambers," I said, heat flushing my face when her jaw dropped. "Should I summon them?"

"No. Not yet." She cleared her throat, giving her mage an expectant look.

Selig returned her stare with a blank expression before recognition finally dawned in his eyes. "If you would excuse me, Your Highnesses." He stood and stiffly bowed, his useless wings rustling beneath his robes. As a half-human half-Fae, he'd been born with magic and black, feathered wings, just like all Ravini Fae males, though his wings dangled like two limp flags. "I must attend to court matters."

I laughed when food crumbs fell from his beard.

But then he gave me a long, dark look. When I felt the whisper-soft brush of invisible fingers across my mind, I threw my mental shields up and matched his look with one of my own. *Try it*, I projected to him, knowing he could hear my thought, *and I'll knee your balls so hard, you'll be pissing blood for a week.*

Selig coughed and sputtered, then stepped back. "Forgive me, Your Grace." He bowed to me. "I meant no harm."

I snarled at him, flashing my teeth like I was a Lupine Fae.

“That will be enough, Selig,” my sister scolded the mage, trails of black magic swirling from her fingertips. “And from now on, you will stay out of my sister’s head, or you will answer to me.”

His eyes widened as he made an awkward bow. “Yes, Your Highness.” He bowed to me. “My apologies.”

I didn’t reward him with an answer as I turned up my nose. I’d never trusted the mage, especially not after his uncle had murdered our family and half the court, but whenever I’d tried to warn my sister, she would remind me that he’d helped us overcome his uncle during the Dark Tide. She’d also say I kept even worse company with Selig’s brother, Thorin. Though some part of me suspected she was right. I’d befriended him at an early age, mostly out of pity. I’d been the only royal, or Fae for that matter, who’d ever been kind to him. I felt sorry for the mind spinner when the entire court shrank back at the sight of him and covered their faces in those ridiculous veils.

Once Selig had left us, Mal motioned for me to sit. I sat in Selig’s seat, an uncomfortable chair made of iron lattice that dug into my rear. Warmth flooded my chest when I remembered just this morning Derrick’s fingers digging into my rear as well, only his touch gave me pleasure and had been far more intimate. He and Marius were such skilled lovers. They put Fachi’s mediocre lovemaking to shame. Plus, they were Ravini Fae, just like me.

Fachnan was a Sidhe Fae. Sidhe males were wingless, as many were dragon riders. Not Fachnan, though. He’d never formed a bond with a dragon, and I often wondered if it was because Fachi was too much of a spoiled, petulant prince for any dragon to take him seriously. His pale hair and eyes didn’t appeal to me as much as the dark features of Ravini males, plus those powerful wings inspired several new sexual positions. Since Ravini females were born without wings, I’d always been jealous of Ravini males, but now I had two sets of strong wings to fly me wherever and however I wanted.

I’d met Marius and Derrick after my sister had sent me on an ambassador mission to the eastern shore. I had gone only to discuss trade, for their land was rich with minerals and other

resources. I hadn't meant to fall in love, but fate had other ideas. I'd felt the bond the moment Marius had helped me from the carriage, his touch burning through the fine silk of my glove. My mates and I had been too distracted to discuss trade, but it didn't matter now. My sister couldn't have more loyal allies. They'd even agreed to take the Avias name, so long as I married them.

"Would you like some tea and cakes?" Malvolia asked, motioning to the steaming teapot and the delicate little cakes with yellow flowers laid out in perfect symmetry on a tiered tray.

I frowned at the curly beard hairs on the tablecloth in front of me. They looked like pubes. "No, thanks." I placed a hand across my abdomen. "We had a late breakfast." I bit my lip as I recalled why we had eaten so late. My mates had found something else to feast on all morning—me.

My sister cleared her throat, giving me a long look. "Are you sure you felt the bond?"

I nodded. "We can mind-speak."

She gasped, arching back as if I'd just flashed her mages my breasts. "You've already slept with them?"

"What did you expect?" I scowled, flicking a wiry beard-pube off my dress. "They're my mates." I turned pleading eyes on my sister. "Are you angry with me?"

She reached across the table and grabbed my hand, her eyes glossing over. "You know I could never be angry with you, sister, even though this puts our truce in jeopardy." She gave my hand a reassuring, warm squeeze, even as shadows fell across her features. "I don't want to go to war with Caldaria."

I squeezed her hand back before pulling away. "Fachnan wouldn't dare start a war over this." Though he was still a prince, it was no secret his elderly father was close to death. Fachi had been regent for the past several years, and he was known to be a coward who refused to fight his own battles.

She arched a thin brow. "For you he would."

I turned up my chin. “You let me handle him.” Soon Fachi would be a king without a queen. Perhaps the humiliation of my rejection would humble him. Despite his vanity, I had cared for Fachi, and I’d thought I could one day love him, but that was before I’d met my true mates, Marius and Derrick Fortis, the Dukes of Elisi.

Fachnan would have no choice but to release me from our betrothal, for mating bonds were rare and held more weight than engagement vows. Marriages had even been dissolved over mating bonds. Luckily, I hadn’t yet married Fachnan. I had put off the Caldarian Prince more than once. Perhaps it had been luck, or maybe intuition, but I’d never been in a hurry to marry him. Now I didn’t have to.

“Where will you live?” my sister asked.

I grabbed a tea cake off the tallest tier, thankful there were no black hairs stuck to it. “With them on their estate,” I said while picking a sugary flower off the cake and popping it in my mouth. My mates had a vast estate east of Delfi, a dukedom that had been gifted to their great-great grandfathers by their sister, my great-great grandmother, making them my cousins thrice removed.

“Not in Thebes?” Mal asked, a wounded look in her eyes.

I took a bite of the cake, buttery vanilla exploding in my mouth. It was so delicious, and I was suddenly hungry. Vigorous lovemaking sure worked up an appetite. “You know they don’t care for court politics.”

“You won’t be able to rule by my side.”

I shoved the rest of the cake into my mouth, crumbs spewing from my lips. “We both know being a queen was never my calling.” Had she forgotten I wouldn’t have been able to rule with her had I married Fachnan?

She frowned, twisting a cloth napkin around her finger. “It could be.”

“I would only make a mess of things.” I wiped crumbs off my mouth with the back of my hand. “Besides, why would I when we already have the best queen who’s ever ruled?”

Mal hung her head. "I'll miss you."

When she looked back up at me, pools of unshed tears reflecting in her eyes, I jumped from my seat. Kneeling by her side, I took her hand in mine, not caring about the gravel that dirtied my gown. "I'll visit often. It will be better this way." I tried to sound reassuring. "I would've been too busy as queen had I married Fachnan."

She dabbed her eyes with her napkin. "Do you love them?"

My chest ached to see her so sad. My sister and I had been through so much, barely surviving the slaughter of our family. There was a time I couldn't imagine never being by her side, but we always knew being a ruler hadn't been my calling. I longed for a family, goddess willing, and I loved the quiet solitude of the countryside, not the bustle and madness of court. "I do."

She straightened and turned up her chin, looking every bit the regal queen. "Then I suppose we need to have a wedding."

"Thank you!" I jumped up and threw myself into her arms, laughing when she grunted beneath me. "You're the best sister ever!"

* * *

Malvolia

My head swam with wine as I sat at the elevated bridal table, nibbling on a buttery roll while looking down at the festivities below. Somewhere across the hall, a quartet of musicians strummed their instruments as guests wearing their most elegant finery lined up to pay their respects to my twin. They brought all kinds of gifts, from colorful fruit baskets to exotic perfumes and silks. I was seated to Marius's right, my sister on his other side, flanked between him and Derrick. My mage sat on my other side, gorging on bread and wine. No doubt his beard and robe were covered in crumbs. I tried not to look in his direction, lest I vomit wine all over the silk tablecloth. Many times I wondered why I kept him as my mage, but then I remembered that I wouldn't have overthrown his evil uncle if not for his help.

But enough about my slovenly mage. After only a fortnight, Flora and I had pulled off the wedding of the century. My sweet sister looked content seated between her mates. My new brothers-in-law were so charming and so devoted to my sister, their wings draped protectively around the back of her chair. I couldn't have asked for better mates for her. She'd smiled more in these past two weeks than I'd seen in our lifetime. As a matter of fact, I hadn't seen her smile since the night our parents had been slaughtered. I'd risk a thousand Caldarian wars to see my sister so happy.

I frowned at the endless line of Fae. We'd be receiving guests for hours, and we still had yet to eat. I couldn't expect our guests to eat rolls all night. Judging by how freely the wine flowed, they'd be as drunk as me or worse before my sister and her mates cut into their cake. As big as a carriage, it had twenty circular tiers with white buttercream icing, crimson flowers, and a rich vanilla cake with raspberry filling. It was divine. Flora and I had selected it after sampling far too many cakes.

Pushing back my chair, I stood, stumbling a little before grasping onto the sides of my chair.

Ever the gentleman, Marius stood and latched onto my elbow, his wings snapping open and shielding us from the gawping guests below. "Are you alright?" he asked me in a hushed whisper.

I shrugged him off while speaking through the side of my mouth. "A little too much wine," I whispered. "Nothing a filling meal can't fix." Then I raised my goblet, wincing when wine sloshed on my sleeve. "A toast to my sister and my new brothers-in-law," I called to the crowd.

"I'll toast to that," a deep voice bellowed.

Bile rose into my throat when a familiar Ravini half-breed stepped out of line and pulled down his hood. Thorin looked too much like his brother, Selig, with that unkempt, dark beard and a narrow face. But whereas Selig had a dull look in his eyes, Thorin's eyes were sharpened to blade points, his gaze fixed on my sister.

My heart hit my stomach when Flora visibly swallowed.

A wave of screams rose from the crowd. Women pulled down their dark veils and men hid behind their black, feathered wings, a futile attempt to shield their minds from Thorin's magic.

My loyal fire mages rushed to the dais, standing between Thorin and us. They spread out their wings and created a fire barrier.

Thorin walked up to the line of mages and bowed before my sister, acting as if the smoke and heat didn't bother him. "Forgive my late arrival. I only just found out about the wedding." He turned his sharp gaze on me. "It seems your courier lost my invitation."

"There was no invitation," I spat, resisting the urge to pull my veil down over my eyes. I would not let my court think I feared the mage who had the power to change our memories, even if his spells only lasted a few hours. My court had taken to wearing the veils ever since the Dark Tide when Thorin's vengeful mage uncle had nearly wiped out my entire family and court. My sister and I had been the only members of the royal family to escape his mind-melting magic.

Derrick and Marius pushed Flora behind them as spouts of fire sprung from their palms.

Thorin threw back his head, chuckling. "Put away your fire, boys. I've only come to offer blessings to the bride."

My sister's mates snarled at the mage, their fire rising like geysers. Impressive, though their flame paled in comparison to my conflagrations.

"Thorin!" Selig cleared his throat beside me. "You're not welcome here."

Thorin gave his brother a mournful look before clucking his tongue. "Never thought I'd see the day my own brother stabs me in the back."

My sister gently pushed through her mates. "It's okay," she mouthed to them while cupping each of their faces. Then she looked down at Thorin, her brows drawn as if she was about to

lecture a toddler. “Thorin,” she said stiffly, her lips pinching into a scowl.

“Flora.” Thorin looked into my sister’s eyes as if they held the moon and stars and every other constellation. “You’re the image of perfection. I hope your grooms realize how lucky they are.”

She smoothed trembling hands down her pearl-colored gown. “They do.”

Thorin’s lower lip hung down in a pout. “Why wasn’t I invited?”

She shook her head. “You know why.”

He held out his hands in a gesture of surrender. “I thought we were friends.”

“We were.” Flora cleared her throat. “We are.” She lowered her voice. “But everyone’s frightened of you.”

Thorin rubbed his bushy beard while eyeing her. “Are you?”

She turned up her chin, glaring down at the mage. “Should I be?”

“No.” His shoulders slumped in defeat. “Will I be able to visit you in Elisi?”

“No!” Derrick and Marius boomed in unison.

Ignoring them, Thorin looked at my sister with wide, watery eyes. “Flora?”

It’s a ruse, I projected to my sister through thought. Don’t believe him.

I know, she answered, her audible sigh ringing in my ears.

Pulling back her shoulders, she gave him a reproachful look. “Thorin, I’m not a child anymore. I have responsibilities to my mates and to our people.”

His eyes flared with rage. “Which means you can’t associate with a pariah.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice faltering.

No, do not apologize, I snapped through thought. He's taking advantage of your kindness.

“I understand,” he said, his shoulders falling. Then he turned to the crowd, his laughter the deep rumble of rolling thunder. “You know my magic can pierce those veils.”

The guests gasped and turned their backs. A few brave fire mages stepped forward, shielding the throng.

My sister clutched her throat. “Thorin, how could you?”

Red rage clouded my vision. I'd had enough. “Thorin! Have you come simply to ruin my sister's wedding?”

When he turned to me, and I saw the malice in his eyes, I had my answer.

“Why would you think that?” he asked in a mocking tone.

It was then I deeply regretted not executing him during the Dark Tide. Even though Flora had protested that her friend wasn't a threat, the rest of the court feared Thorin had inherited his uncle's temperament. They had asked me numerous times to execute him, but I'd gone against my better judgment and caved to Selig's and my sister's pleas. That didn't mean Thorin was welcomed at court. In fact, after his last mind-spinning prank, he was forbidden from stepping a foot in Thebes. He knew this, and yet he had the gall to crash my sister's special day.

“Shame on you for causing a scene and scaring our guests.” I pointed in his direction, smoke twisting from my fingertip like a coiling serpent. How easily I could choke him with it. “Now you see why we didn't invite the Monster of Delfi.”

He jerked back as if I'd scorched him. “I'm not a monster!”

“Your actions say otherwise. Go now before I lose my temper.” I waved him away like I was shooing a stray dog. “And if you set foot in Thebes again—” I paused, enjoying the fear shining in his eyes when my trail of magic broke into three deadly serpents, coiling above his head and poised to strike. “I will kill you.”

After giving my sister one last withering look, he turned from the dais with a dramatic flourish. The crowd parted as if the earth had split open while he marched through them toward the door.

I nodded toward four of my most loyal fire mages. “Make sure he leaves the city walls.”

They bowed and then quickly followed him.

My sister looked from her mates to me, her eyes wide with fear. “I’m worried he’ll retaliate.”

“Not if he doesn’t want to have his head put on a spike,” I answered, ignoring Selig’s gasp. “Come now. No time for dark thoughts.” I clapped my hands together, then waved toward the musicians, wincing when they struck up a somber tune. I motioned toward the servants. “More wine and bring out the feast.” I lifted my goblet into the air while scanning the sea of frightened faces. “Do not give the mind spinner another thought,” I said. “My sister has found her true loves. Let us celebrate!”

Marius held up his goblet, too. “Have no fear,” he said before winking at me. “Your sorceress queen has the power to keep you safe. The mind spinner doesn’t stand a chance against her magic.”

Much to my relief, the crowd broke into cheers.

My sister held up her goblet. “All hail, Queen Malvolia, for saving us from the darkness and keeping her people safe!” She slid up to me and kissed my cheek. *And for being the best sister ever*, she added.

Heat flamed my face when the crowd cheered louder.

I kissed her back. *As are you. Never forget how much I love you.*

Tears welled in her eyes. *And I will always love you.*

The musicians struck up a lively tune, the wine flowed freely, and soon everyone was dancing and laughing, and Thorin was nothing more than a distant memory. Still, I couldn’t stop worrying that the mage would find some way to

retaliate. If he so much as tried to harm my family or my people, I wouldn't hesitate to strike him down.

* * *

Selig

32 years later

Selig brushed breakfast crumbs from his beard while hurrying down the drafty stairwell toward the throne room. His queen would be angry with him for his tardiness. He stumbled down a step, nearly tumbling onto the landing, cursing his clumsy feet and the darkened stairwell lit with only a few flickering sconces. He was still half asleep after a long night with a brutish fire mage, Simon, or Salian. He forgot the mage's name, though it made little difference. He never kept the same lover more than a fortnight. He'd just descended the last of the stairs when a hooded figure stepped out of the shadows.

He gasped, clutching his throat when the figure pulled back his hood. Thorin! Only, his brother looked as if he'd aged fifty years. His skin had turned ashen, and his black beard was now gray. The lines framing his mouth and eyes looked like tributaries on an old map. Fae-kind lived for centuries and aged slower than most humans. At only one hundred years old, Thorin should've looked like a forty-year-old human. Instead, he looked like a decrepit old man. Never mind that Thorin and Selig had a human mother. Their Fae magic should've prevented them from aging so quickly.

He swallowed back a lump of apprehension before taking a hesitant step forward. "Brother, it has been too long." Though obviously not long enough, for he sensed his brother brought calamity.

"Too long," Thorin said, his voice a sibilant whisper. There was a wickedness in Thorin's eyes that Selig didn't recognize, the only thing about him that didn't appear old. Selig always believed the eyes were a window to the soul, and his brother's eyes conveyed a blackened heart beneath. But there was something else lurking within that shriveled up organ, something even more sinister. When Thorin's eyes flashed red, Selig had his answer.

Demon!

He forced a smile while sending out a thin tendril of magic, hoping he could glimpse into his brother's thoughts. "How have you been?"

"Good. You?" Thorin asked, throwing out a painful barrier that made Selig's magic coil in fear.

Great goddess, he'd never sensed such strong magic in another mage, not even in Malvolia. Thorin had been playing with dark magic and in the process had let a demon corrupt his soul—just as their uncle had done nearly fifty years ago. That explained Thorin's advanced aging. Warily eyeing his brother, Selig swallowed back his fear. "My queen keeps me busy."

Thorin arched a bushy brow. "Still treats you like her dog?"

"She's been on edge," he answered, though he refused to state why. Her seers had sensed a great calamity, predicting unrest and war. As usual, the mists had been vague, so they weren't sure where the attack would come from. Selig had a sickening feeling his brother would be the cause. "And what have you been doing all these years?" he asked, hoping to glean anything, so he could warn his queen, though he wasn't sure if the warning would do any good against a demon-possessed mind spinner.

Thorin held up his hand, and a glowing white ball of light hovered above his palm. "Practicing my magic."

Great goddess! The energy that pulsed off him was unlike anything he'd ever felt!

"My powers are stronger," Thorin said while being mesmerized by his own light, admiring it the same way Selig stared at his naked lovers.

Selig shuddered to think what that ball of light could do. "H-how much stronger?" he asked, unable to mask the tremor in his voice.

Thorin snarled, revealing decaying, chipped teeth. His demon was eating him alive. "My spells are more complex, and they last years."

“Years?” Last time he’d seen his brother, his spells had only lasted hours.

“Yes, brother.” Thorin flashed a triumphant grin. “Years. Are you impressed?”

“If-if my queen learns of this,” he stammered, “she will have you executed.” Selig decided not to tell his brother he suspected Thorin’s magic was far stronger than Malvolia’s. “She already promised to kill you if you ever returned to Delfi.”

Thorin’s hoarse laughter was like a thousand tiny spiders burrowing beneath his skin. “Let her try.”

It was then Selig knew that Thorin was the great calamity, the new wave of darkness. He took a step back, pressing his shoulders against the wall. “Why have you come?”

His brother advanced toward him, the ball of magic still glowing brightly above his palm. “To warn you.”

Selig swore the temperature in the stairwell had dropped twenty degrees. He pressed his shaky palms against the cool stone behind him. “Of what?”

Thorin tossed that ball of magic from one hand to the other as if he was playing with a child’s toy. “Delfi is about to descend into chaos.”

“Why?” Selig rasped, his throat suddenly bone dry.

“Why do you think?” Thorin pouted. “They didn’t invite me to the wedding.”

Thorin had gone mad. “That was over thirty years ago.”

“A mage never forgets.” Thorin’s lips twisted into a hateful scowl, and he leaned into Selig, hovering so close, they were just a breath apart.

Selig breathed through a wheeze as a bone-numbing chill sunk beneath his skin. “Think before you do this.”

Thorin pulled back, his eyes glossing over, that ball of magic still floating above his hand. “Flora was the only one who refused to shield her face, who treated me with dignity.

But then the way she looked at me that day, like I was a monster...all because of them.”

A warm trickle dripped down Selig’s leg. “Of-of who?”

“Malvolia and the dukes.” His eyes flashed with malice. “They turned her against me.”

“Thorin,” Selig implored, hoping he could still reach his brother, that his madness hadn’t eclipsed Thorin’s Fae heart. “Flora’s happily married to her fated mates. She’s expecting twin daughters.”

Thorin clutched his chest as if he’d been stabbed through the heart. “She’s pregnant?”

“She is.” He tried his hardest to infuse a note of calm into his voice. “There’s a green witch on the southern border with amazing fertility powers. Many Ravini have fallen pregnant these past few years.”

Much to Selig’s horror, that ball of light in Thorin’s hand grew larger, glowed brighter.

“How could she do this to me?” Thorin cried. “I love her!”

Selig swallowed back his fear. He had to make his brother see reason. “It’s time you moved on, brother, and forgot your silly infatuation.”

Thorin snarled, waving that ball of light in Selig’s face as if he intended to strike him. “It’s more than infatuation.”

“If you do love her, let her be happy.” Selig stepped to the side, angling for the stone stairs. If he could just run away, turn his back on his brother’s blinding memory-erasing magic, maybe he could escape and warn the others.

“Why should I care for her happiness, when she never cared for mine?” he snapped, sounding like a petulant child.

“She cares for you,” Selig argued, eyeing that ball of light as it continued to grow. “She’s the reason Malvolia didn’t turn you to dust.”

Thorin’s gaze snapped to his. “Maybe she should’ve had her sister end me.”

“Malvolia has already named her nieces as her heirs,” he continued. “They are predicted to carry powerful white magic and to be wise, benevolent rulers who will bring an end to the chaos. Please,” he implored, clasping his hands in a prayer pose. “Please don’t do this to Flora.”

“Flee to Fachnan’s court.” Thorin moved with surprising alacrity, blocking Selig’s access to the stairs. “After today, Malvolia and Flora won’t have a court...or a country.”

More urine trickled down Selig’s thigh and pooled on the stones. “What are you going to do?”

Thorin’s grin was the devil incarnate as he cupped that ball of light with both hands. “What I do best—create chaos.”

Selig fell to his knees, wincing at the pain that shot through his bones. “Brother, I beg of you.” He cried out when his brother hit him with that ball of light, immobilizing him with blinding pain as a loud gong rang in his ears.

“I warned you, didn’t I?” Thorin called over the din. “If you weren’t my brother, I would’ve broken into your mind and shattered it like glass.”

Selig cried out again. “Brother, please!”

He covered his ears when Thorin’s menacing chuckle reverberated in his skull. “Your queen is plotting to kill you, Flora, and Flora’s mates,” his brother warned. “She’s gone mad and believes her sister has turned against her. An oracle has predicted one of Flora’s daughters will kill Malvolia when she comes into her full powers. You must escape to Fachnan’s court before Malvolia kills you, but first, you must warn any nobility loyal to Flora and her mates. Do you understand?”

Selig heaved a shaky breath when the blinding white light faded and the ringing in his ears finally stopped.

He gaped up at his brother. Where was he? What had happened?

Thorin held a hand down to him and helped him sit on a step. “Do you understand what I’ve just told you?”

“Yes, brother.” Selig hung his head in his hands, trying to piece together what he’d just heard—Malvolia, the queen he’d loyally served over three decades had gone mad. He blinked at his brother. “What will become of Flora and her family?”

Thorin’s pout looked insincere. Was his brother evil? No. Thorin was good. Malvolia was evil.

“Her mates will sadly die defending her.” Thorin rubbed his hands together and eagerly licked his lips. “But I will help Flora and her daughters escape to Caldaria where we will join forces with Fachnan.” He waved his fists in the air. “Together, we will rise up against Malvolia, and we will defeat the evil sorceress queen in a crushing blow.” Shadows fell over Thorin’s features as he glared down at Selig.

Selig swallowed. Great goddess! Malvolia had turned evil!

Thorin helped Selig stand. “Now go tell the world. Say it has come from a powerful seer who was executed by Malvolia shortly after she delivered this prophecy.”

“Yes, brother.” Selig stood on shaky legs. His undergarments were wet and sticky. How had that happened? Then he realized none of that mattered. He had to warn Malvolia’s court that their queen had turned evil before she destroyed them all.

Chapter Two

Flora Avias

Delfi, three months later

“Come away from the window, Flora.”

After one last lingering look at the starry night sky, I released the heavy velvet curtain and leaned back on the brocade sofa, my hand resting on my distended belly. My stomach was so large that my belly button had already popped, and I still had a month to go. I knew I carried girls, for the Avias line always bore twin daughters first, hence the reason Delfi had always been ruled by two queens until I decided to abdicate my title to live on my mates’ country estate. We’d been happy, living in quiet solitude until now. I gave my mate Derrick a pleading look while wringing my fingers together. “Marius should’ve made it by now.”

It had been almost four days and still no word from my other mate. He was just meeting with a Windhaven emissary on the other side of the border in an effort to secure us sanctuary. What was taking so long?

Derrick sat beside me, grasping my hand. “He’ll be here.”

I chewed my lower lip, casting another worried glance toward the window. I wasn’t fooled by my mate’s false confidence. I could feel the current of tension clinging to him like a second skin. “We should’ve never parted.”

“Flora.” He squeezed my hand. “He’s never let us down before.”

I swallowed back a lump of panic. “What if she’s captured him?” And how could my sister have so ruthlessly turned on me, hunting me and my mates like dogs? After all Malvolia and I had shared, how had it come to this? My sister had turned our home into a court of nightmares, ruthlessly killing anyone she suspected of plotting to back me in overthrowing her. I still didn’t understand it. Years ago my sister had offered to share the throne with me, and I’d refused. Why would she

think I wanted to steal it from her now after I'd lived contently with my mates for over thirty years, and after Malvolia had already promised that my daughters would one day inherit the throne? Why suddenly had my sister gone mad with distrust? Had she gone insane, or had she been cursed? Either way, I supposed it made no difference now. I wouldn't know how to find and kill the witch who'd cursed her.

Settling a hand on my abdomen, Derrick flashed a smile that didn't mask the worry in his eyes. "Marius is capable and clever, and all this worrying isn't good for you or the babies."

The sitting room's double doors swayed open, and Lady Chara Inferni swept into the room, her dark hair piled elegantly on top of her head, her beautiful smile so serene, as if the world wasn't burning around us. Claspng her hands together, she smiled. "Supper is served."

Derrick stood, holding a hand down to me. "Come, Flora."

I took his hand, resenting how everyone treated me like a child, pretending as if our world wasn't on the precipice of crashing. I held my tongue, though. Chara and her husband, Tobias, were the only Delfian allies who'd offered us sanctuary. I shuddered to think what we would've done without them.

"Cook has prepared a delicious meal and his special, soothing herbal tea," Chara said as Derrick handed me over to her and she hooked her arm through mine.

"Thank you, Chara," I said to my friend, overwhelmed with gratitude as we walked into the dining hall. The soothing tea did help calm my nerves. "I don't know what we would've done without your generosity."

Chara clucked her tongue. "Tobias owes Derrick and Marius after what they did for him."

Years ago, when my mates were young and impetuous adolescents, Derrick and Marius had saved Tobias from a tribe of trolls after the young lord had gone into the Periculian Forest on a dare. Tobias had come away with a missing eye,

and Marius had been shot through the wing, though they could've suffered far worse.

“The two don't compare,” I said, “and you know it.” Chara and Tobias not only put their lives at risk by helping us, but the lives of their three young sons, for I feared there was no depravity beneath my sister's twisted mind. After all, she'd put a price on my head as well as on my innocent, unborn children.

“Marius will return with reinforcements,” she whispered in a soothing voice, the candlelight from the overhead chandeliers making her silver-rimmed eyes shine like moonlight, reminding me that Chara had a touch of Sidhe Fae blood, as most of us did. “The tide will turn, and all this will be just a bad memory.”

I swallowed at that. I wished I shared her confidence, but I'd been in the heart of the last Dark Tide, when our mother and aunt's mage had turned on them, trying to seize the throne for himself. My sister and I had been no more than children, just fifteen, hiding in the castle sewers while blood rained down on our heads. It seemed several lifetimes ago that Malvolia and I had clung to one another, promising never to betray each other should we survive.

My nostrils flared at the smells of roasted garlic and onions as I eyed the large silver platters laid out on the long dining table. Ordinarily, I would've been eager to feed the children growing in my belly, but worry churned my gut.

Derrick had pulled out my chair, and I thanked Chara when she sat beside me and handed me the steaming tea. I took several fortifying sips, hoping it would calm the internal tremors that shook me to my soul.

Lord Tobias swept into the room like a winged phantom emerging from the shadows with his one good eye and that slash where his other eye had been. He grabbed Derrick's arm, whispering into his ear. Unease coiled around my spine. Something was wrong.

Derrick gave me a grim look. “We have a visitor. Stay here,” he said to me.

A visitor! I refused to heed his command as I shoved back my chair and heaved myself to my feet. I stumbled toward the door. Goddess, please let it be Marius!

* * *

Thorin

Thirty-two years. That's how long Thorin had waited to be reunited with the woman he loved more than anything—the woman he worshipped enough to set the world ablaze. But the disappointment on her face when her gaze settled on him was enough to turn his veins to raging infernos and cause his demon to scratch at the surface of his skin. But how could he be mad at his sweet flower? Her beauty nearly took his breath away. She'd hardly aged these past thirty-two years. Her skin was fair for a Ravini, though her hair was as dark as a raven's wing. She had large amber eyes, plump lips, a long, slender neck, and round breasts that reminded him of two ripe peaches. His fingers itched just to squeeze them. She would've been absolutely perfect hadn't it been for that obscene bulge beneath the waist of her gown.

A tall, flat-chested woman dressed in fine silks stood beside Flora. Chara, lady of the manor. Thorin had heard tale of her fertility powers. Odd, for he'd imagined she'd look different, fuller, with large breasts and curvy hips, not this bean pole. Her eyes narrowed as she glowered at Thorin. Though her beauty was nothing compared to Flora's, she would've been more attractive without that scowl. How he loathed the nobility for the way they had always treated him with scorn, resenting him for his bastard blood and his unusual magic.

Lord Derrick and the one-eyed Ravini Thorin remembered to be Lord Tobias Inferni flanked the women, their wings spread like hawks about to snatch mice from the field. There was no mistaking the fire in their eyes as they glared at Thorin. About a dozen winged guards also flanked the hall, poised and ready to strike at their lord's command. Feathered fools. They had no idea the kind of magic they were up against.

“Oh, you’re not Marius,” Flora said, the color rising in her cheeks as she looked from Thorin to his mute companion.

Thorin’s heart shattered, exploding in a million tiny fragments that rained down on his soul like falling shards of glass.

Thirty-two years he’d plotted, planned, and sacrificed everything to win back her love. ‘*Oh, you’re not Marius.*’ Her words rang in his ears like a gong, burned through his soul like he’d been doused in dragon fire. His first thought was to lash out, to hurt her for hurting him. Magic tingled his veins as he curled his fingers inward, digging into his palms until nails broke skin. But no, he wouldn’t hurt the woman he loved. Perhaps this was just an effect of her condition. Her stomach was protruding so far, she could practically rest a tea saucer on it. He glared at Derrick for impregnating her. He’d make sure the son of a siren would suffer just as his brother had for defiling Thorin’s sweet flower.

Forcing a smile, he stepped toward her. “Flora, it has been too long.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Forgive me, but do I know you?”

He raised a hand toward her, his robe slipping down his arm, revealing the veins in his wrist turning black with rage. “It’s me, Thorin.”

“Thorin?” She clutched her throat, the color fading from her cheeks. “You hardly look the same.” Her gaze shifted from Thorin to his companion and back again. “Are you unwell?”

He cringed at the sound of pity in her voice. It was true he’d aged much faster than his brother, the sacrifice he had to make to amplify his magic, the sacrifice he’d made for *her*. “Just tired,” he said with a sneer. “I will recover soon.”

“Of course,” she said, frowning as she smoothed hands down her belly. “Forgive me, but I was hoping you’d be Marius.”

“I’m sorry I can’t be him.” But he would be soon enough, for he’d have her change his appearance, make him look just

like one of her mates. Then he'd change her memories, and she'd never know her young, virile mate was a mind spinner.

The snap of Derrick's wings echoed across the grand hall's marble floors. "What are you doing here, mind spinner?"

Chara gasped and covered her eyes. Derrick and Tobias stepped forward, their wings shielding the women.

Thorin blinked at Derrick. "That's hardly a welcome, considering I'm your mate's last chance at freedom."

Derrick held out his hands, smoke curling from his fingers. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"And how did you get past my guards?" Tobias snapped.

He gave them each a cool look, and then held his hands in front of him, balling up his magic. "You underestimate my powers."

Tobias stepped forward with a snarl. "And you overestimate my patience."

Derrick jutted a chin toward Thorin's companion. "Who's she?"

Thorin didn't bother sparing the girl a second glance. He remembered little of her other than her homespun dress, straggly, auburn hair, the smell of manure that clung to her skin, and, of course, her very large and pregnant belly. "Just a peasant I picked up in one of the villages."

Flora squeezed between Derrick and Tobias, her gaze darting to the girl again. "Is she alright?"

He shrugged, annoyed by Flora's concern for a human peasant. Didn't the princess care that he'd returned to her after over thirty years away? Didn't she want to know what he'd been doing during his time in exile? "It doesn't matter."

Thorin took a step back when Tobias edged closer to him. "Tobias, isn't it?" he asked with a sneer.

Tobias crossed his arms, his one eye narrowing. "Lord Inferni to you."

Laughter escaped Thorin's throat like a burst of dragon flame. "Lord Inferni," he said with a disinterested slur. "Queen Malvolia's army has your home surrounded."

They gasped, looking at Thorin as if he were a ghost. "What?"

"How?" Flora grasped Derrick's arm, giving him a pleading look. "We were so careful."

"Not careful enough." Thorin waved at her extended stomach with a sneer. "No matter how many faces you shift into, Flora, you cannot hide your pregnancy."

Jealousy surged through Thorin when Derrick wrapped an arm around Flora's waist, nuzzling her neck.

Chara's eyes darted to her husband while she chewed her nails. "Will Malvolia kill us?"

Lord Tobias grasped his wife's hands. "No, your fertility magic is too important to her."

She visibly swallowed and nodded. If the noblewoman only knew these moments would be her last.

Flora let out a gasp, grasping her mate's arm.

"Don't panic," Derrick murmured, kissing Flora's cheek. "Marius will be here soon with reinforcements."

"Marius is dead," Thorin blurted, repressing a grin at the horror reflecting in Flora and Derrick's eyes.

"W-what?" Flora breathed and then fell against her mate.

Thorin surged forward, wishing he could catch Flora, but her mate beat him to it, sweeping her into his arms and carrying her through the hall's tall double doors and into an adjoining room, Lady Chara and her servants making gasping sounds as they followed after them.

The rest of the hall descended into chaos as Lord Tobias barked orders to his men.

Thorin seized on that moment to follow after Flora's entourage. The human girl followed him like a trained dog, never letting him out of her sight. When two Ravini mages

tried to block their path, he hit them with a subtle memory spell, the light invisible even to the Fae eye, though the spell would only last minutes, not years.

“Your lord says you must let us pass,” he mumbled.

“Yes, sir.” The guards obediently stepped aside.

Thorin marched into a large dining hall, snatching a warm, buttery roll off the table. When the human gave him an imploring look, he tossed her the roll and then stuffed several more into his pockets. He scowled at the many dishes piled on the table, a feast fit for an entire village made just for a few aristocrats. When he and Flora defeated Malvolia, he would strip the nobility of their land and titles and laugh when they begged for food in the streets.

Thorin walked into the adjoining drawing room, with floral wallpaper, ivory vases, plush carpets, and flickering, brass sconces. Flora let out a moan when Derrick laid her on one of the brocade sofas.

“Flora,” Thorin breathed when her head rolled back and her hand fell listlessly to the floor. Curse those brothers for impregnating her and making her so vulnerable. The Flora he once knew wouldn’t have fainted over the loss of an expendable mate. The Flora he once knew wouldn’t have mated with those foolish dukes in the first place. She had loved Thorin above all others. Why else had she been so kind to him when no one else would even look in his direction?

Derrick snarled at Thorin, smoke pouring from his fingers when he edged too close to Flora. Thorin snarled back and he hit Derrick with a spell similar to the one he’d used on the guards, telling him that Lord Inferni had invited him here and that he was their only hope in escaping Malvolia. Derrick blinked and shook his head before letting his guard down. How easy these Fae were to manipulate.

“I’m sorry, Flora.” Thorin’s knees cracked as he knelt beside her, taking her hand in his. “He never made it past the Windhaven border.”

Flora cried out, her back bowing as if she was possessed. “No, no, no!”

A warning horn blared in the distance. Thorin looked outside just as the night sky lit up with an inferno. Their time was up.

Lord Tobias flew into the room. “She brought her entire army! They’re attacking the battlements!”

“What do we do, Tobias?” Lady Chara cried, her eyes wide with panic. “Where do we go?”

Tobias flew to Thorin, snatching his arm. “What did you mean when you said you’re our last chance at freedom?”

Thorin shook the nobleman off his arm with a sneer. “I said I was Flora’s last chance, not yours.”

“You can’t leave us here!” Chara screeched like a wounded bird. “Malvolia will kill us!” Clasp ing her hands together, she gave Thorin a pleading look. “She’ll kill our children!”

The flames outside raced closer to the manor, lapping at the windows as enraged shouts were heard coming from above and below.

“I have no choice.” Thorin shrugged, unmoved by her pleas. “We must save Flora and her unborn daughters at all costs.”

“No, no!” Flora sat up, dragging a hand down her face. “Our friends come with us.”

Tobias spun around, his wings nearly smacking Thorin’s head. “Fetch our sons!” he called to the servants.

Two young women, who looked to be mostly human with slightly tapered ears, bowed and quickly left the room, leaving behind just a frightened human male servant who stood by the door, his knees shaking with fear.

“They will be safe,” Thorin said with a grin as he slowly stood and adjusted his robes. “Malvolia will take pity on them when she learns you were murdered by Derrick.”

Thorin swore the temperature in the room heated up by at least twenty degrees when both Ravini noblemen glared at him.

Flora gasped. “Thorin, what are you talking about?”

Derrick’s top lip pulled back in a snarl, thick smoke rising from his hands. “We’re not hurting our friends.”

Before the fire mage could attack, Thorin hit them all with a blast of white light so powerful the magic burned when it was pulled from him. His knees weakened from the energy he’d had to use, but he blew out a breath, forcing himself to remain strong. He’d used too much magic these past few days, and his fatigue was catching up to him.

Chara whimpered, and Derrick and Tobias jerked forward, fighting at those invisible chains that bound them. The male servant slumped against the wall, his mouth dropping open in shock. Thorin unsheathed his blade and sliced Chara and Tobias’s throats, stepping back before they crumbled to the ground. He winced when blood sprayed from the gaping wounds in their necks and splattered across his robe. How he hated killing. Such messy business. He’d be relieved when he and Flora were far away from here where they could start a new life together, a peaceful life far removed from all the bloodshed. And when time came to defeat Malvolia, he would be sure to take a back seat to the chaos.

Thorin stepped up to Derrick. “Listen to me closely. Chara and Tobias deceived you and tried to kill you.”

Derrick slowly nodded.

“They wouldn’t do that,” Flora cried out. “They’re our friends.”

Thorin spun toward the sofa, surprised to see Flora was sitting up and looking straight at him with clarity in her eyes. Why wasn’t his magic working on her?

He hit her hard with another blast of light. She fell back against the sofa as if she’d been struck, then blinked at him in a daze.

He'd forgotten that stronger witches required more mind-bending magic. Still, he wasn't about to risk having to blast her again and frying her brain. "Fine," he spoke through gritted teeth. "Your friends were killed by Malvolia's mages while defending you." He turned toward the human and waved her forward. "This peasant girl has willingly agreed to trade places with you, Flora." He snatched the girl's wrist, ignoring her cry of pain when he dug his nails into her skin. "You will trade faces with her, and you and I will escape to Caldaria."

Flora's mouth fell open. "But they will kill her."

Curse the elements! "Better her than you," he seethed.

"It's wrong." Flora shook her head, her eyes focusing again. "She is with child."

Smoke began to fill the room as he stalked toward her. "No, Flora, this girl has a stomach tumor." He waved toward the human with a snarl. "She is dying. She wants to do this for you."

Flora blinked at him. "I will not leave Derrick."

Thorin fought the urge to tear out his hair as he dragged a frustrated hand through his beard. "Flora, they will kill you if you don't leave."

She blinked at him again. "I will not leave him."

"Fine!" Cursing, Thorin threw up his hands, then ducked and swore when a flaming rock shattered the window and landed on the carpet. "He and the servant will trade bodies. The servant wants to save Derrick. He's also ill and hasn't much longer to live."

Flora blinked again, unmoved by the smoke that filled the room. "This is wrong."

Thorin hit her with another blast of light, this one draining all his remaining magic. "You will do what I say, Flora," he spoke through a wheeze, his chest tightening. "Understood?"

"Yes," she answered, her eyes glossing over.

"Good." He smoothed trembling hands down his robes. "Let's get to work."

He'd have no choice but to let Derrick come along after all the magic he'd used. He'd need a strong fire mage to protect them until he could regain his strength. Curse Flora for draining him!

* * *

Flora Avias

The Periculian Forest, next morning

I sat up with a groan, gasping when I rolled forward and nearly fell off the tree limb beneath me. Thank the elements for my protruding stomach holding me back. I took a chance and looked down, swallowing bile when I couldn't make out the forest floor below. My eyes slowly adjusted to the low light. The forest was so thick, I could scarcely see anything else but tree needles hanging over us in clumps that spanned the width of my mate's wings. Where were we? I spun in Derrick's arms. His legs and wings hung limply over the branch, the back of his head pressed against a massive tree trunk as he quietly snored. Dried blood matted his hair and stained his clothes. I picked more needles out of my tangled hair and brushed them off my smock. My smock? Why was I wearing tattered and coarse peasant clothes? I looked at my pale, freckled arm. This was not my skin. I was in a human's body. A pregnant human. Hopefully, the girl whose body I mimicked was somewhere safe. I wondered why Derrick wasn't disguised as someone else, but I briefly remembered changing him back after we'd snuck out of Tobias and Chara's estate.

I shifted back into my body, the action taking several painful minutes. Shifting skins had been so much easier before my pregnancy. I smoothed a hand over my distended belly, regretting that after over thirty years of wedded bliss, I'd finally fallen pregnant in the heart of the darkest time in my country's history. I regretted bringing my daughters into this world. Like me, they'd be hunted forever until my twin destroyed them, or they destroyed her.

I sniffled, wiping a fat tear off my cheek. Then I cursed when another needle poked my backside. I plucked the needle out of my skirt, alarmed to see it was as big as a blade. I

swallowed back a knot of panic, for only the heart of the Periculian Forest had such large trees. It was also where the trolls lived. The primitive giants were known for eating humans and Fae alike. Why had Derrick flown us here?

I tensed when I thought I heard a man moaning somewhere below us. An icy tendril of fear wrapped around my spine when memories of yesternight slowly filtered into my mind. We'd narrowly escaped after Malvolia's mages had killed Lord and Lady Inferni. I bit down on my knuckles to keep from crying out at the loss of our dear friends. What would happen to Chara and Tobias's young sons? I wouldn't put it past my evil sister to kill the children. And we'd just left them there. Guilt gnawed a hole in my gut as I struggled to recall what had led up to the attack.

I turned back toward my mate, shaking his shoulder. He woke with a start, smoke pouring from his fingers. He blinked at me a moment, and the smoke slowed to a trickle.

Derrick, what happened? I asked him through thought, afraid to speak aloud lest some predator hear us.

The look of hatred reflecting in his eyes turned my veins to ice. *Malvolia found us.*

My chest constricted so tight, I struggled for breath. *Marius?*

The hatred in his eyes turned to despair. *Gone.*

Biting down on my knuckles, I stifled a cry. *No, he can't be!*

Derrick clutched my shoulders, his eyes hardening to stone. *Flora, Malvolia got to him. It's just you and me.*

Marius couldn't be gone. I refused to accept it, not when I still felt the pull of his soul to mine. I gave my other mate a pleading look. *He can't be.*

Flora, you have to accept it. We need to flee far from Malvolia's reach. He rested a warm hand on my belly. I must keep you and our children safe at all costs. It's what Marius would've wanted.

I wanted to smack that look of pity from Derrick's face. *Why? Why would my sister do this to us?*

His eyes lit with flame. *Because she's a wicked bitch, and if the prophecy is to be believed, one day one of our daughters will make her pay for her cruelty.*

I grasped Derrick's arm when another moan echoed through the forest. *Who is that?*

Frowning, he squinted at a branch below us. *I think it's the mind spinner.*

I followed his line of sight, surprised to see an old man with a gray beard laying across one of the lower branches. Though it had been a few decades since I'd last seen the mage, I was still shocked at how much he'd aged compared to his brother. *What happened to him?*

I don't know. Derrick scrambled to his knees as his wings snapped open. *We have to get away from here.*

I clung to him after he helped me to my feet. *What about Thorin?*

My mate swept me into his arms, a task that was getting harder the more my belly grew. *He can crawl back into his hole for all I care.*

Derrick, he was my friend. I clutched my throat, a wave of guilt washing over me. *I think he saved us.*

Derrick grimaced. *Then he'll understand why I need to get you to safety.*

Before I could protest, Derrick flew us from one branch to another while ducking under thousands of sharp needles. I wanted to stop him, to tell him that we had to save my friend, too, but some deep-rooted voice warned me that Thorin was an even bigger threat than Malvolia.

* * *

Thorin

The Human Lands, deep in the Werewood Forest

Two months later

Thorin used the last of his energy to crawl across the moss-covered floor of his mistress's den, stopping when he reached the hem of her long robes. "Mistress." He heaved a weary breath, trying to keep the note of desperation from his voice. "I need your help."

She let out a low growl before squatting beside him, the long, crusty nails on her blackened toes curling into the floor. *What happened?* she asked through thought, her raspy voice echoing in his skull.

"It was Flora." A lone tear slid down his cheek and splattered on the ground beneath him. "It took her too long to succumb."

She touched his cheek with a sharp talon, and then recoiled, her sibilant hiss rattling his bones with dread. "Your demon is gone."

Too afraid to look into her dark, fathomless eyes, he hung his head. "Where did he go?"

"Off to a stronger host, no doubt." She stood, the rustle of her robe gently grazing his cheek and displacing the cavern's stagnant air. "How could you be so careless?"

He frowned down at his brittle, splitting nails, caked in grime. "Love makes us careless."

"No, love makes *you* careless." Her robes swished again as she turned her back to him.

"Find me another demon." He blinked at her backside, at the sharp points of her curved, bony spine visible even through the thick robe. "I have to get back to her." A note of desperation slipped into his voice.

"You think it's that easy?" Snarling, she spun back around, her grotesque features hidden beneath the dark hood of her robe. "It took us more than thirty years to break you and make you again."

He let out a keening wail. "I don't have that long. I have to get to Flora now!"

She let out an otherworldly screech that shook the floor beneath him and sent tremors racing across his spine. “You should’ve thought about that before letting her drain your magic!”

Tears flooded Thorin’s eyes. How could he live another thirty-two years without Flora? Malvolia might find and kill her by then. No, he wouldn’t accept it. He’d try harder, work faster. He’d do anything to get back to her, even burn the world down again.

Chapter Three

Shirina Avias

23 years later

Lying in the loft bed I shared with my twin nieces, I stared up at the warped wooden slats. Another night of restless sleep. The feathers from our thin, coarse mattress poked my back as I contemplated how I loathed my mundane life. For my entire twenty-three-year existence, I'd spent it hiding in various forests or caves, but the depressing shadows of the Periculian Forest had to have been the worst. Maybe because of the unnatural chill. Maybe because everything smelled of mold. Or maybe because two years ago my twin sister had been killed by a bear in this very same forest. I grunted when Aurora rolled over and elbowed my ribs.

“Ouch!” Turning on my side, I glared down at my four-year-old niece. Pushing back her dark, chin-length hair, I looked into her silver-blue eyes shining like portals into the summer sky, even in this low light. “That wasn't funny.”

“Sorry, Auntie,” she pouted while tucking her hands beneath her smooth cheek. “I can't sleep. Em keeps talking to her friend.”

I looked over at Ember, who faced the back wall while whispering to herself and toying with her long dark braid. Ember had lots of imaginary friends who bugged her at the most inopportune times. I blamed my parents who'd stuck us in this cursed, dull forest for forcing my niece to make up companions. My sister and I had lived similar, mundane lives, even though as royal princesses we should've been raised in a palace with pretty gowns, exotic perfumes, and ballroom dances.

I sat up on my elbows, the top of my head nearly scraping the ceiling, as I looked over Aurora at her sister. “Em, who are you talking to?”

Ember stilled and then rolled toward me, her big silvery blue eyes reminding me of a frightened baby bird. “My friend,

Auntie.”

I nodded toward the straw doll Ember clutched to her chest. “You mean, your doll?”

“No, not Bethamy.” She shook her head, pushing the doll behind her as if she feared I’d punish her little pile of straw with rags for clothes.

I contemplated burning Bethamy when she wasn’t looking, but she never let that doll out of her sight. Besides, Ember cherished that toy more than anything. I knew I’d never have the heart to destroy it. It would do no good to scold her for keeping us awake. She’d only cry, and she knew how much I hated her tears.

I heaved a sigh and slowly counted to three. “Please tell your friend you need to get some sleep.”

Ember shook her head. “She doesn’t want me to sleep. She says they are coming.”

“Who?” I asked, then scowled down at Aurora as she scratched at the side of her arm. “Aurora, stop picking your scab.”

Aurora pouted and scratched harder. “It itches.”

I grabbed her hand, forcing it to her side. “Leave it alone.” Frowning, I touched the scab, not liking how it was festering. The Tau stone my mother had implanted was coming loose. If Aurora didn’t stop scratching, the stone would fall out. Then what? This stone was what prevented my niece from accessing her teleporting magic. Last time she had the ability to teleport, she’d almost fallen off a cliff.

Her eyes watered as she shook me off her arm. “It itches real bad.”

“Okay.” I heaved a groan and counted to three again, something I did often with my nieces. “I’ll ask Yaya to make you a poultice. Can you leave it alone until I get back?”

“Okay, Auntie.” She curled her fingers into claws, hovering over her arm.

I knew once I turned my back, she'd start itching again, so I hurried down the ladder and then padded through the narrow kitchen across the uneven wood slats, guided by the light from the hearth's warm fire. Once I reached my mother's room, I rapped on the warped door. When my mother didn't answer, I pushed open the door, surprised to see her lumpy feather bed empty.

She must've been in the outhouse. A shudder stole up my spine at the thought of going outside. I did my best to shake off my fear. Aurora needed me. I wrapped my cloak around my shoulders, put on my thin soles, and grabbed the lantern, lighting it quickly before hurrying outside. I hated going outside at night. The forest that surrounded our house seemed much more frightening, the trees looming over our small home like death's shadows reaching their long, spindly claws into a grave.

I quietly padded across the hard, damp earth that smelled of mold and rot, trying not to draw too much attention to myself lest those shadows awaken. I was shocked to find the outhouse door open and the stall empty. Where could she have gone? I spun a slow circle. Immediately, my thoughts turned dark. How could they not, after what had happened to Tari? To make matters worse, my father, our fierce winged protector who had the power to summon a raging inferno, was still away trading with the nearby villagers. My mother should've been in bed.

But then I noticed the pigs were resting in their pen, the old dog slept soundly on the porch, and not a sound came from the chicken coop that was bolted down for the night. Surely, if something sinister had happened to my mother, the animals would've been upset.

"Mother?" I whispered into the darkness, dismayed when I was met with silence. Then I spied light spilling from the grain shed's slightly ajar door. What was she doing in there? Had she a sudden craving for porridge?

I tiptoed toward the shed, surprised when I heard my father's deep rumble and the rustling of his heavy wings coming from inside. He was home! My knees wobbled with

relief. We hadn't expected him back for another week. I thought about turning around and giving them privacy. Ever since that night Tari and I had caught our very naked parents tangled together in the grain shed, we'd known better than to disturb them after dark. It was the reason I had an aversion to porridge. I was about to turn around when I remembered Aurora. I couldn't risk letting that Tau stone fall out. But I didn't want to interrupt my parents.

"Fallax?" my mother cried. "Derrick, are you sure?"

"Keep it down, Flora!" my father scolded. "Do you want Shirina to hear?"

I froze at the mention of my name. So they weren't in a compromising position. Why were they talking about the forbidden Fallax Islands, and why didn't they want me to hear? When their voices went silent, I knew they were speaking through thought, a rare Fae magical ability fated mates, twin siblings, or mind-reading witches shared. Luckily for me, I was a mind-reading witch.

Though I knew it was wrong, I couldn't help myself. I tiptoed toward the shed and knelt behind a pile of wood, wincing when the cold ground chafed my knees. I sent out a thread of magic, an invisible line that permeated the thin shed walls, and connected their minds to mine, enabling me to listen to their thoughts, one of my magical talents my parents didn't know about, the other being my siren's call.

How long ago was that? my mother asked, fear ringing in her words.

Yesternight, my father answered. *I flew here as soon as I could.*

You flew here? She gasped aloud. *What if you were spotted?*

Malvolia's spies were too focused on Tarianya.

My world tilted and spun. I fell against the pile of wood, cursing when a splinter dug into my finger. Did he say Tarianya? No. My sister was dead. Mauled by a bear. That's what my parents had told me. Why would they have lied?

You sure they flew to Fallax? my mother asked. *The wyverns will kill them.*

No. If you saw her magic—Flora, it was magnificent. My father’s voice shook with what felt like awe. She broke a curse chamber, turned Malvolia’s mages to dust, and she brought back the prince from the dead.

What prince? And my sister was alive? How? And why would my parents keep her from me? From her children?

Necromancy? my mother asked, disgust and maybe fear, ringing in her voice.

She used Inretius flowers, but yes.

My mother hissed. *Not even Maiadra had the power of necromancy.*

Then certainly she’d also have Maiadra’s power to control the wyverns. My father sounded excited, agitated.

What do you think they’re planning?

I heard rumors in Cyrene that Helian’s brothers are alive, that he brought them to Thesan.

Wait. Was my father speaking of my sister’s shifter mates, my nieces’ fathers? I thought they had perished when King Fachnan’s dragon army had razed Lupine, the shifter stronghold.

Alive? My mother’s cry reverberated like a gong. *How?*

I dug my fingers into the wood, not even caring about the splinters any longer, or the chill from the outside air that seeped into my bones.

The prince intercepted them before they reached the slaughter.

They’ve been in Thesan all this time?

My father paused for several tense moments. *If the rumors are true.*

You think that’s where they’re going?

Most likely.

They'll recognize her scent.

No doubt.

Oh, Derrick! my mother cried. What have we done?

Too late for remorse, Mother, I thought to myself.

What had to be done, my father snapped, his voice sounding so different from the tender, loving parent I thought I'd known.

Malvolia won't stop hunting her. The fear in my mother's voice was palpable.

Which means they'll have no choice but to seek sanctuary with Fachnan. There was a strange, almost maniacal undercurrent in my father's voice, and for the first time in my life, I was frightened of the man I'd always trusted above all others to keep me safe.

The prophecy is coming true.

It is, my father rumbled, which is why we need to go to Peloponese.

What about Shirina and the children?

I held my breath, my heart pounding a drum in my ears while waiting for my father's answer.

I was thinking they could stay with Thorin, he finally said after a long pause.

The breath whooshed from my lungs. Thorin? My mother had told me about her old friend, the mind-spinning mage. Why would she send us to live with him?

You want him to take their memories, too? my mother asked.

My father's voice dropped to a low rumble that reverberated through my bones. Do we have a choice?

Great goddess, no! My knees weakened, and I nearly fell onto my backside.

No. I don't want them in the middle of this.

Neither do I, especially when we're not sure of Shirina's powers.

I broke the mind connection and stumbled to my feet, my chest aching so badly, I could scarcely draw breath. Tari was alive, though my parents had let me mourn my twin's death for the past two years. Even worse than severing our special twin bond, they'd separated a mother from her children. Now my parents were going to steal my memories, Aurora's and Ember's, too. They were evil!

When I heard the shed door rattle, I ran into the house like the hounds of hell were chasing at my heels. I snatched a knife and rag from the kitchen table and raced up the ladder.

Aurora and Ember were sitting up in bed, looking at me with wide eyes.

"Do you have the poultice?" Aurora asked as she held onto her arm, her eyes misting with tears.

"No, Aurora." I grabbed her arm, examining the wound. It was bleeding, and I could make out the gray Tau stone just beneath the surface of her skin. One cut, and it would be loose. Then Aurora could teleport again.

Aurora gasped, trying to pull away when I tapped her wound with the tip of the blade. "What's wrong, Auntie?"

I looked at them through a sheen of tears. I hadn't even realized I'd been crying. "Girls," I pleaded, "do you trust me?"

They both nodded.

"Then listen to me carefully." My voice cracked with each word. How could my parents do this to us? "We're in danger."

Aurora gasped. "What danger?"

I swallowed back my emotion. It felt as if a giant was sitting on my chest. "A bad man is coming to take our memories and take us to the bad faeries."

"It's three bad men, Auntie," Ember said. "They're going to set our house on fire."

“Ember,” I scolded, “we don’t have time for your make-believe.” I gasped when I heard my parents’ sibilant whispers outside. We were out of time. “Aurora, that Tau stone has to come out.” I squeezed my niece’s arm. “Then you have to transport us far from the hut. Can you do that?”

Her eyes shone with fear. “I only know the edge of the meadow.”

The meadow was just beyond our forest home and took us several minutes to walk there. That would give us a good head start. I tensed when the back door rattled. “Then take us there.”

“Okay,” she said, holding her arm out to me while squeezing her eyes shut.

I could weep at this child’s trust in me. It was at that moment I made a vow to myself I’d never betray them as my parents had done to us.

“This is going to hurt, baby,” I whispered through a watery voice as tears spilled over my eyelids. “I need you to be a brave girl.”

She stiffened, clenching her fist. “It’s okay.”

The door opened, and the chill night air filled the inside of our small cabin. I sliced open Aurora’s wound and squeezed out the stone as well as a prodigious amount of blood and puss.

“Ewee,” Ember squealed while looking over her sister’s shoulder.

“Shh,” I warned Ember, then swore when more blood pooled out of the wound. Curse my parents for putting us through this and bless Aurora for being so brave. “You okay, darling?” I whispered.

Aurora opened one watery eye. “Yes, Auntie.”

“That’s my good girl,” I said as I wrapped the rag around her arm. “I’m so sorry.”

She turned up her chin, her lower lip trembling. “It’s okay.”

“Shiri, you girls awake?” my father called from below.

The girls gasped. “Pappo!”

I placed a finger to my lips, stiffening. “Em, take your sister’s hand,” I said as I grasped both of their hands. I looked into Aurora’s wide and trusting eyes. “Take us to the meadow.”

* * *

I sucked in a scream, squeezing my nieces’ hands when we were pulled into a dark, spinning vortex. We tumbled through space for a moment and fell into the tall meadow grasses. I landed with a grunt, then grunted again when my nieces fell on top of my chest.

Moaning, they rolled off me.

“That hurt, Rora!” Ember swatted her sister with the end of her straw doll.

“Sorry.” Aurora sat up and hugged her sister. “I didn’t mean it.”

I pushed myself up and reached for Aurora’s hand. “You did fine, Aurora.” I smacked a stalk of grass out of my face and blinked up at the night sky. “We made it in one piece, and that’s what matters.”

Aurora looked at me with bright, trusting eyes. “Now where, Auntie?”

“I don’t know yet.” I chewed my lip. “Let me think.”

Where could we go that my parents wouldn’t find us? My father had been all over Caldaria, trading goods and secrets. He knew every inch of the countryside and had a network of friends and spies. Then I remembered my father saying the girls’ fathers were in Thesan and that Tari was heading in that direction, too. They also said something about Tari going to Peloponese, but no. Tari wouldn’t go to Fachnan’s kingdom, not after the evil Fae king had ordered the slaughter of her mates and their entire shifter village. I certainly wasn’t taking my nieces there. Their sharp incisors would give away their shifter blood.

If we could make it to the northern shore and find a Thesan merchant ship, we could barter passage to the island. I fingered my cloak's silver clasp around my neck, worrying it wouldn't be enough to buy passage. I'd use my siren voice if necessary. But how would we get all the way to the northern shore? It would take weeks, even months, on foot. I couldn't ask Aurora to bring us there. She hadn't teleported since she was a toddler, and then she could only teleport to places she knew.

"Auntie?" Ember whispered, tugging my skirt.

"What, Ember?" I snapped, regretting it when she flinched. I cupped her smooth cheek. "I'm sorry, Em. Auntie is stressed."

She visibly swallowed. "The bad men are coming to set the house on fire."

I repressed a groan. I didn't have time for her imaginary friends tonight. "What?"

She pointed to the starry night sky above. "They're up there."

I gasped when I saw three winged shadows overhead. "Get down!" I whispered, hovering over my nieces. I heaved a sigh of relief when the shadows flew past us. Then I inwardly swore. Fire mages. Malvolia's mercenaries.

"They can fly like Pappo," Aurora said, a note of awe in her voice.

Ember's eyes filled with tears. "They're going to kill Pappo and Yaya."

Fuck. My father didn't stand a chance against three other fire mages, and my mother couldn't summon fire. "Aurora." I squeezed her hand. "Take us back."

Aurora's lower lip quivered. "Will they kill us, too?"

Magic raced through my veins as my spine stiffened. "No, baby. I won't let them."

* * *

Pain lanced up my leg when we landed on hard, damp earth. I grunted and rolled onto my side after my nieces broke their fall on my stomach and chest. We'd landed between the shed and the house. The pigs grunted their disapproval. Our dog yelped and ran under the porch with surprising speed for such old bones. What a great protector. Aurora and Ember scrambled to their feet, blinking at my parents who stood there staring at us as if they'd seen ghosts.

"Girls!" my mother cried when Ember ran to her, tucking her face in her grandmother's skirts. "You nearly scared me out of my skin." The irony of my mother's expression wasn't lost on me, since she could literally shift out of her skin so that she resembled an entirely different person. Right now she looked like herself—tall, dark hair, amber eyes, and fair skin.

My father latched onto Aurora's arm with a scowl, a strand of his long, dark hair falling out of its queue and over one eye. "Did your Tau stone come out?"

Aurora looked imploringly at my father. "The bad men are coming."

He ruffled his black, feathered wings. "What?"

"Three fire mages," I said, stumbling to my feet.

"When?" he demanded.

I gasped when three winged shadows appeared above us. "Now!"

"Flora!" My father shoved Aurora into my mother's arms. "Take the girls and go!"

My mother cried out, stumbling toward me while clinging to the girls.

I took Aurora and Ember from my mother, side-stepping her when she grappled for us. "No!"

My father jumped in front of us, his massive black wings snapping open while twin flames burst from his hands.

"Shiri," my mother snapped, her eyes wide with fright. "Listen to your father!"

“I said ‘no!’” I boomed, my siren’s call taking over my voice and echoing through the forest like a roll of thunder.

The girls clung to my skirts, trembling. I grasped their faces. “It’s okay,” I mouthed to them.

My father spun around, his fires extinguishing as he gaped at me.

“Shiri!” my mother gasped, looking at me as if I was the reincarnation of Malvolia herself.

I scowled at my parents. I didn’t have the time or energy to explain why I’d hidden my siren’s call from them all these years. Not that they deserved an explanation after they’d lied to me about Tari.

My father spun back around when the other mages hit the ground hard, their fire shooting into the air like flaming geysers.

I released a deep breath and summoned every ounce of siren magic I possessed. “Malvolia’s mages!” I hollered, my powerful voice reverberating through the forest and shaking the tree limbs. “Hold your fire! On your knees!”

The mages’ flames extinguished as they dropped to their knees like birds with clipped wings. I tried to get a glimpse of them from over my father’s feathers, but I saw nothing but dark, winged silhouettes.

My father jumped into the air, his flame spouts arcing high above him, and I knew he was going to turn the other mages to dust. But then a shaft of moonlight struck one of the mage’s faces, and my whole world came to a standstill as I looked into his dark eyes. We locked gazes, and for a moment, there was just him and me; my parents’ screams faded into the background, and the world wasn’t burning.

And I knew. I *knew* he was my fated mate.

Just as my father’s enraged war cry reverberated in my skull, I threw out my hands, the siren inside me completely possessing my body. I couldn’t let him kill my mate! “Father, hold your fire!” I hollered, the rumble shaking the ground beneath me. I looked up at my father as if I was a voyeur

peering through the windows of someone else's eyes and jutted a finger toward the ground. "On your knees!"

My father landed with a curse. He snarled up at me. "Shirina, what the fuck?!"

"What are you doing?" my mother screeched, snatching my shoulder.

I shook her away like her hand was on fire. "Mother, on your knees, too!"

She fell to the ground like a puppet with cut strings. "Shiri!"

"Quiet, Mother!" I snarled.

She looked up at me with frightened eyes, her lips pressed together as if they were glued shut.

My father fought his invisible restraints. "Let me up so I can finish them."

"Quiet, Father," I commanded.

The murderous look in his eyes when his lips clamped shut was enough to make my knees go weak. Pulling back my shoulders, I reminded myself I was a powerful witch. Though my parents hadn't been there to witness, I'd used my siren's call on others before and knew my father couldn't hurt me or my mate unless I let him up.

The girls still clung to me, their tremors shaking my legs. I knelt down beside them, stroking their cheeks. "It's okay, girls. Auntie won't let anyone hurt us." I nodded toward the three fire mages still on their knees. "I need to talk to them. Okay?"

They both nodded, and I took their hands while cautiously approaching the winged Fae. As if obeying my silent command, the clouds overhead parted, and more moonlight cut through the trees, revealing all three mages. Bile rose into my throat, and I squeezed my nieces' hands tighter when I felt the pull from not just one, but all of them.

How? My mother had told me that strong witches usually took two lovers, but only the most powerful white witches had

three fated mates. The goddess Maiadra had three mates. Did this mean I was a white witch, too?

The mages were fanned out in a V formation. The one in front had long chestnut hair, warm skin, swirling tattoos over a bare, broad chest, and dark, piercing eyes that rendered me momentarily speechless and turned my legs to jelly. I had a feeling he was the alpha of the pack judging by the raw power that pulsed off him. The pull I sensed coming from him was too strong to be natural. Was he my fated mate, or had he cast a spell over me?

“Why have you come?” I asked him, the power behind my voice rustling the hair off his shoulders.

“To kill Flora and Derrick,” he answered with a grunt, the words forcefully dragged from his lips.

“Why?”

He nodded toward the other two mages behind him. “They killed our parents, and they’re plotting to kill our queen.”

Their parents? I scanned the mages’ faces. They did look related, all with the same large, dark eyes and warm complexions. I was painfully aware of my nieces shaking like leaves in a windstorm as they trembled beside me. I gently rubbed their backs. “Who were your parents?”

The mage gave me a look that would’ve made a lesser witch cower. “Lord and Lady Tobias and Chara Inferni.”

I angled toward my father, a blade piercing my chest at the sparks of rage shining in his eyes. “Father, answer me truthfully.” I swallowed back my fear when his nostrils flared and he growled like a wounded animal. If he and my mother didn’t despise me before, they certainly did so now. “Did you and Mother kill their parents?”

He snarled, flashing sharp incisors. “No.”

“Who killed their parents?” I pressed.

He worked a tic in his jaw, glaring. “Malvolia.”

“You lie!” the alpha mage boomed.

The girls buried their faces in my skirts.

I patted their heads as I gave the alpha mage a hard stare. “He can’t lie,” I answered, doing my best to infuse a note of calm into my voice.

I glared at my growling and grunting father. “I heard you and Mother talking about Thorin in the shed,” I said to him, accusation lacing my words. “I heard everything.”

His jaw dropped. “How, when we were mind-speaking?”

I refused to answer. “Why did you lie about Tari?” My throat constricted at the sound of my sister’s name on my lips.

He struggled against his invisible restraints. “To keep her safe.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He stopped struggling long enough to shoot eye daggers at me. “Because you would’ve fought us.”

My fear of my father was replaced with resentment. As his blade of betrayal pierced deep into my spine, a rage I’d never known flooded my veins, and I had to clutch the girls to ground my anger. “So you let me think my twin was dead!”

“Yes.” He grunted, struggling to stand. “Let me up, Shiri. There could be more mages.”

“Are there more of you?” I asked the alpha.

“No.” The fire in his eyes had cooled, replaced with two inky, hard pools of stone. A chill snaked up my spine when our gazes locked, and I feared my fated mate would stop at nothing to kill my parents.

I swallowed back bile, forcing myself to be brave, not just for my sake, but for the children. I dug my fingers into their shoulders, then released them when Aurora cried out. “Sorry, baby,” I mouthed to her. My gaze shot to the alpha mage. “What kind of spell are you casting on me?”

“We’re not.” His words came out like searing arrows, burning the air between us.

“You are!” I insisted.

He shook his head. "It might be the mating bond."

I looked from him to the other two mages. "Are you saying you're my mates?"

I swore when the three of them nodded.

"How do you compel me to speak?" the alpha asked.

"I'm asking questions, not you," I spat. "You, there." I pointed to one of his brothers. He had a mop of dark hair and feral eyes so piercing I could practically feel him visibly undressing me. Like his other brothers, he wore no tunic, and his hard, tattooed chest looked to have been sculpted from granite. I repressed a shudder. "What do you feel when you look at me?"

"The need to protect you," he blurted.

Heat flushed my face. "And you?" I asked his other brother, the one with the smooth, youthful face, long, tousled hair, bare chest with similar tattoos, and full, kissable lips.

He visibly swallowed. "The same."

"Were you going to kill the children and me, too?" I asked them.

"No," they simultaneously blurted, the strength of their words nearly knocking me off my feet.

"Then what were you going to do with us?" I pressed, praying my fated mates weren't monsters.

"We would never harm children," the youthful brother said, his eyes shining with sincerity. "We didn't know about them. We were sent to take you hostage."

I tried my best not to sway on my feet, especially when my nieces squeezed my hands. I squeezed their little fingers back, reassuring them with a smile. "For what purpose?" I asked him.

He blinked at me. His lashes were so long, and his bottom lip so plump. I could scarcely think past kissing him. "To use as leverage against the white witch."

The white witch? My sister? The thought of them fighting Tari was the cold bucket of water dumped all over my head that I needed to bring me back to reality. And what would they do to me to get to Tari? I squeezed my nieces' hands again, trying to calm the trembling in my limbs. "Malvolia will torture and kill me."

"We won't let her," they simultaneously blurted.

"Just great." I let out a groan of frustration. "My fated mates are fools."

"Shiri," my father called, pulling against his legs as if they were stuck in mud. "Let me up."

I waved toward my mates. Fools or not, I couldn't let my father hurt them. "So you can kill them?"

"Tobias and Chara were our friends. I won't kill their sons." He paused, releasing a long breath. "Or my daughter's mates."

How badly I wanted to believe him, that he had one shred of concern for my happiness when my entire life it felt as if he was always watching me, waiting for me to turn evil like Malvolia, the same way he and my mother had started to leer at Aurora, thinking I couldn't hear when they whispered about us.

"Then what will you do to them?" I demanded, my siren voice ringing through the trees like a reverberating gong.

"Bind them and get Thorin to change their memories," my father answered, cursing after the words were forced from his mouth.

"And mine, too?"

He cursed again. "Yes."

"And the girls?"

His eyes narrowed, then flashed with rage. "Yes."

The girls gasped, pressing into me, Ember's straw doll crackling as she crushed it between us. Curse my father for upsetting them.

I glared at him, no longer afraid of his anger as my own rage swelled my veins. “How can you be such a monster?”

The shell that had hardened his features finally cracked, and he gave me an imploring look. “To keep you safe.”

I snorted at that. I’d heard enough. Certainly, there were better ways to keep us safe than to hand us over to a stranger and have our memories erased.

Resolve stiffening my spine, I looked back at my mates. “I will release you from my spell, but only if you make me two promises.”

The alpha arched a brow, giving me an assessing look. “What are they?”

“That you won’t harm my parents and that you’ll take my nieces and me someplace safe.”

“No, Shiri!” my father bellowed.

“Yes,” the younger mage called out. “We’ll do it.”

There was no mistaking the dark look the alpha gave his younger brother. I could tell by the rage simmering in his eyes, he wanted nothing more than to kill my parents. Too bad. They might have been monsters, but they were still my parents, my nieces’ grandparents. Even if I wanted them killed, the girls would be devastated.

“You won’t take us to Malvolia?” I asked them.

They shook their heads. “We won’t.”

“Shiri,” my father pleaded, his voice cracking. “Listen to me!”

I turned on him with a snarl. “Quiet! You will not follow us.”

He flinched as if I’d smacked him, and then his eyes glossed over. I made the mistake of looking at my mother, who had tears streaming down her face.

“Don’t give me that look,” I snapped, angry with myself for making them cry, and furious with them for putting me in this position. “Not when you’ve been lying to me for two

years. Not when you deliberately broke our hearts and separated children from their mother. Not another word from either of you until we're long gone, and you will *not* follow us." My voice constricted with emotion, making it hard to push the words out, but I squeezed my nieces' hands again, pulling them with me as we moved closer to my mates.

My mates. Huh. I still didn't know how I felt about that.

"You may rise," I said to them, nearly losing my nerve when they stood and towered over me. They were even taller than my father, their dark, wide wings making them look like angels of death. "You will not hurt my parents," I repeated. "You will take us from here to a safe place of hiding."

Before I knew what was happening, the alpha swept me into his arms and shot into the sky like a backward bolt of lightning, sending the contents of my stomach racing into my throat. I barely kept from vomiting while searching the night sky for the girls, relieved when two winged figures closed in on us, their dark wings shining a deep blue beneath the moonlight. They each carried a laughing child in their arms.

"Higher, faster!" the girls cried.

I admired my nieces' fearlessness, but mostly, I envied their naivety. To them, they were just going for another night ride like they'd done many times before with their pappo. What they didn't know was we could've been flying from one dangerous situation into another.

Chapter Four

The world passed beneath us in a blur. My mates flew faster than my father had ever flown, so fast, the frigid air stung my cheeks and burned my lips. I kept trying to look over at my nieces, but my mate's wings were blocking my view. We'd been flying for several minutes. The girls had to have been cold by now. In our haste to leave, I hadn't thought to get their cloaks. I thought about asking our winged chariots to stop for the night, but I feared the spell I'd put on my parents would wear off soon, and my father would come after us.

So I held my tongue while the displaced wind from my mate's heavy flapping wings blew back my hair. As I clung to his thick neck, I was painfully aware of his fingers digging into my thighs. The only other man I'd ever let hold me like this had been my father. Not that I had a lack of suitors. Despite the fact that we lived in the heart of a dark and deadly forest, suitors still found me. Tari had said my siren powers drew them in. It had gotten so bad, that Tari had put double and triple wards around the house. Still, a few of them had managed to find me. None of those men had ever appealed to me, though. Women didn't, either. I'd started to think that perhaps I wasn't meant to have a lover.

Now I was painfully aware of my mate's hard, tattooed chest and thick arms and his special scent, a blend of sage and sulfur that made me want to straddle him and lick every inch of his glistening skin. Perhaps I'd never been attracted to another because my heart knew to wait for my three fire mages.

My mates.

Wow.

What had the elements been thinking to match me up with Malvolia's mages? They might not have been evil, but they served an evil queen, which was bad enough. And what had I been thinking in flying off with them? Though what choice did I have? We couldn't have escaped my parents without them. Still, I couldn't fight the nagging doubt that I'd made a

mistake. It was too late for regrets, though. We would give my mates a chance, and if I didn't feel safe with them, I'd have Aurora take us somewhere else. Perhaps sooner rather than later.

The one who carried me hadn't given me one kind look during our flight. In fact, his expression was unreadable, a hard mask of granite. I wondered if he was angry with me for not letting him kill my parents. Hadn't he believed me when I'd told him my parents couldn't lie? Did he doubt the strength of my siren voice? Or perhaps he did believe me, and he finally realized he'd been duped his entire life by my evil aunt. There was only one way to find out—ask my reticent mate, though that twisting in my gut warned me he wouldn't be open to conversation.

I cleared my throat, calling above the din of his flapping wings. "What's your name?"

He stared straight ahead, and for a moment I wondered if he was deaf or mute, but no, he'd heard and answered me just fine earlier.

I held my breath, waiting, watching as he worked a tic in his jaw.

"Draevyn," he finally answered, his voice as cold as the hard glint in his eyes. Yeah, he was angry.

I wouldn't let his sour mood intimidate me. We were fated mates, after all, just like my parents, who were madly in love. In fact, in all my life, I'd never heard them utter an unkind word to each other.

"Draevyn." I clutched his neck tighter. "I'm Shirina."

"I know," he answered coolly, his expression as hard as iron as he kept his gaze straight ahead.

What a toad. I hated that I trembled in his arms. Why did this Fae make me so nervous? Why did I *let* him make me so nervous? Usually, men were terrified of me, not the other way around.

"Where are you taking us?" I asked, anxious energy making my voice rattle.

“Someplace safe,” he said, continuing to stare straight ahead.

He wasn't just a toad. He was a fat, croaking pond dweller with big, bubbly warts. “Specifically where?”

“Abyssus, our estate in Delfi.”

“Delfi?” I gasped. “Where Malvolia lives?”

“No, not where she lives.” His voice lacked the slightest hint of empathy.

I heaved a breath of frustration. “Care to expand on that?”

His shell cracked long enough for his eyes to flash with annoyance. “It's a big country. Malvolia lives far north. Our estate is far south.”

“What if she finds us there?”

“Hopefully, she won't.”

I was growing ever tired of his obtuse answers. “Hopefully?”

“Malvolia is too focused right now on the Caldarian and Windhaven armies and stopping the white witch.”

My sister. Damn. “How far is your estate from here?”

“A two- or three-day flight without passengers. With you slowing us down—” He paused, sneering as if the thought of having to carry me soured his stomach. “It will take three or four.”

Ire warmed my veins, and anxiety was replaced with aggravation. I was tired of dancing around his foul mood. “My parents didn't kill your parents,” I blurted.

He worked another tic in his jaw before speaking through clenched teeth. “They did.”

“They can't lie when I use my siren voice.”

He still refused to look at me. “They lied.”

Forget calling him a toad. He was a first-rate dragon's ass. “So you're angry you didn't get to kill them, and I suppose you think it's my fault.”

“It was our right to kill our parents’ murderers,” he spoke through a hiss as he finally spared me a cold, hard look, “and you took that from us.”

Turning up my chin, I refused to let the cruel prick intimidate me, though his rejection felt as if he’d driven a talon into my heart. “Forgive me for not wanting *my* parents to be killed, either.”

His lips pulled back in a snarl, and the pain that flashed in his eyes reminded me of a trapped and wounded animal. “They were going to steal your memories. You should’ve *wanted* us to kill them.”

Tears pricked the backs of my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I would not let this arrogant bastard know how much he’d hurt me. “It’s a beautiful night. I think I’ll enjoy the scenery in silence.”

He turned his gaze to the sky, and for the first time, his expression changed from aggravation to relief. “Thank the elements.”

Ohhh! What a scaly dragon’s ass! No, more like the flaming fart emitted from a scaly dragon’s ass.

I’d once dreamt of finding a fated mate, a man who would look at me with the same love and adoration in my father’s eyes whenever he looked at my mother. I never would’ve imagined I’d find three fated mates, but at least one of them hated me, and I feared a future with him would be anything but miserable.

* * *

Night had long fallen, my arms and legs were stiff, and my hands and face were frozen by the time we began circling for a place to land high up in the mountains. The air was thinner here, making it harder to draw breath, and everything seemed...bigger. The trees were easily thrice the size of the trees back home, their trunks wider than my family’s cabin, which meant that we were in giant country. Just great.

One of the brothers pointed to a cavern with a wide ledge in the distance, and Draevyn followed after him before

unceremoniously dropping me on the ground, not giving me enough time to steady myself before he shot back into the sky. Luckily, the youthful brother steadied me with one of his wings, or I would've fallen on my ass. He shook a fist in the direction my tormenter had flown. "Easy with her, Drae!"

I seriously doubted his brother heard him, but I appreciated his concern. I mumbled my thanks and stepped away from him.

I was momentarily stunned when he smiled at me, revealing the cutest dimples. "Would you like to take her?" he whispered, motioning to Ember sleeping in his arms, her little doll tucked in beside her.

"Yes, please," I said, and thanked him as he peeled her away from his bare chest. Though she was asleep, she still clung to that blasted doll as he placed her in my arms. I kissed her forehead, warm from his body heat. I couldn't resist smelling her hair and caught the scents of sulfur and sage, just like him.

I swallowed when he smiled at me again. At least he didn't act like he loathed my very existence. "Where are we?"

He rolled his shoulders and flexed his wings. "A few days west of the Windhaven border."

I pushed back my fear, nodding toward the tops of the thick pines below. "In giant country?"

He grimaced. "Yeah, but we don't scent any nearby."

I silently nodded, praying they were right.

His other brother, the one with the feral eyes, landed beside him with Aurora clinging to his neck. Aurora was wide awake with a huge grin etched into her features. He set her down, and she ran to me.

"Wasn't that fun, Auntie?" she squealed, tugging at my skirts.

Ember stirred in my arms, then looked up at me with foggy eyes. "Are we safe, Auntie?"

I kissed her forehead again. “Yes, Em. Would you like to get down?”

She shook her head, clinging to me.

My heart leapt into my throat when the brother with the feral eyes jumped back into the sky. Where was he going?

“He’s gone off to gather wood for the fire,” the youthful brother said to me as if reading my mind. “Come inside.” He motioned to me with a smile. “We’ll set up a comfortable space for you and the girls.”

He held up his hand like he was holding a torch. Flames sparked off his fingers, lighting the way inside the damp, dark cave.

Holding Aurora’s hand, I reluctantly followed him, gravel crunching under my shoes and my nose wrinkling at the musty odor. “How do we know trolls don’t live here?” Or bears. Or worse.

“We don’t,” a dark voice boomed behind me.

I scowled at Draevyn over my shoulder. I hadn’t even heard him come back. It unnerved me that he was so good at sneaking up on people, and I wondered how many other Fae he’d hunted besides my parents.

“We stayed here a few weeks ago and didn’t come across any trolls,” the youthful brother said as he led us to a corner and motioned toward a smooth slab of stone that was wide enough for me and the girls to sleep on.

“That doesn’t mean they’re not here now.” I spun a slow circle. The cave was relatively shallow, and I didn’t see any monsters lurking anywhere.

“We’d smell them if they were nearby,” the youthful brother said, making a face. “Troll dung has an unmistakable stench.”

I blew out a breath, hoping he was right.

Aurora jumped on the slab and scrambled across it. I cringed when I noticed her stockings were already full of holes. I cursed myself for forgetting to bring their shoes. And

yet, neither of the girls complained. Ember asked to be let down, and she joined her sister, beating her straw doll's head against the slab as she crawled across it, following her sister as they explored the cave, hopping from one rock to another.

"I think three fire mages and a siren can take on the trolls," the feral-looking mage said as he dumped an armful of branches into what looked like an old burn pit toward the mouth of the cave.

I stiffened at the comparison. "I'm not a siren." From what my father had told me, sirens were hideous Fae-eating ocean creatures with human voices and fangs.

He hit the branches with a burst of flame, instantly igniting them before turning to me. The glow from the firelight highlighted the sharp angles of his face, making him look even more feral. "Then what are you?"

I didn't sense any malice in his tone, so I answered, "A witch."

His nostrils flared as if he was trying to scent my magic. "Who has the siren's call?"

"Yes," I answered, feeling suddenly self-conscious as all three brothers gaped at me.

"Amazing," the youthful brother said, his grin widening. He'd doused the flames on his hand and juted a thumb in his chest. "I'm Nikkos." He nodded toward the feral brother. "This is Blaze." He slapped Draevyn's back. "And you've already met Drae."

"Yeah," I said sarcastically. "I've met Draevyn." I refused to look into his brother's eyes, knowing they were probably full of malice and resentment. I plastered on a smile for Nikkos and Blaze. "I hope you're both nicer than him."

Nikkos blanched, then elbowed his brother. "What did you say to her, Drae?"

Draevyn threw up his hands, grumbling. "I'm taking first watch." Before anyone could stop him, he stormed out of the cave and shot into the sky.

“Sorry about him.” Nikkos dragged a hand down his face with a groan. “He’s had a rough night.”

“Haven’t we all?” I spat.

“Yeah, that’s no excuse.” Nikkos clenched his hands by his sides. “Are you tired, Shiri? It *is* Shiri, right?”

“Shirina,” I corrected. I wasn’t ready to be on such a familiar basis with them yet. Mates or not, they were still Malvolia’s mages.

Nikkos’s face turned the color of the fire’s flames, and I felt a momentary stab of guilt for the way I’d treated him.

“Okay, Shirina,” he said, his smile appearing plastered to his face. “If you give me a few minutes, I’ll get your bed set up.”

“I’d appreciate it.” I flashed a hesitant smile as I sat down and smoothed my skirts across my legs.

His eyes lit up, his grin emphasizing the cute dimples in his cheeks. “Of course.”

“Are you or the children hungry?” Blaze asked while wiping soot off his hands. “We could hunt something for you.”

I wrapped my arms around myself, keeping an eye on the girls when they wandered too close to the fire. “We had supper already, thank you.”

As if attuned to my fears, Nikkos ushered the girls away from the fire. “We’ll make a place for you and the girls to sleep.”

I held out my arms and the girls came to me. I wrapped my cloak around their shoulders, tucking them against my sides, wincing when the straw from Ember’s doll pierced my skin. “That would be nice.”

Ember blinked up at me. “Why did we leave Pappo and Yaya?”

“Didn’t you hear, Em?” Aurora looked around my chest at her sister. “They lied about our mama, and they were going to have a bad man change our memories.”

I was painfully aware of Nikkos and Blaze pretending to stoke the fire while listening to the girls' conversation.

Ember pouted, picking a frayed piece of straw from her doll's head. "They wanted to keep us safe."

I squeezed their shoulders. "There are better ways to keep us safe than tricking us."

Aurora looked up at me with wide, innocent eyes. "Is our mama really alive?"

I swallowed back a knot in my throat while fighting tears that threatened at the backs of my eyes. "I believe so." All this time I'd mourned my dear twin, and she'd been alive! I hated my parents for lying to me and tearing our family apart.

"Can we go to her?" Ember asked.

I frowned, squeezing their shoulders. "Right now, we have to find someplace safe."

Aurora crawled onto my knee, straddling my leg while resting her hands on my shoulders. "From the bad man who wants to take our memories?"

I brushed a strand of her chin-length hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. "From lots of bad people."

Ember climbed onto my other knee, gently handing her doll off to me like it was a real live baby. "Like the king who killed our papas and the queen who tried to kill Pappo and Yaya?"

"Exactly," I murmured. I didn't want to give them false hope by telling them that their papas might be alive, too—not until I knew for certain.

Nikkos and Blaze shared startled looks, and I suspected they didn't like their queen being lumped in with the 'bad people,' which was why I couldn't trust my mates. Blaze mumbled something about getting more wood, leaving us alone with Nikkos. I wondered if Blaze truly needed more wood, or if he didn't want to be around us while we insulted his queen.

Aurora wobbled on my leg, and she hissed when I tried to steady her by clutching her arm. Guilt washed over me when I realized I'd forgotten about the cut on her arm.

“Get off me, girls,” I said as I handed the doll back to Ember. “I need to examine Aurora’s arm.”

To my surprise, Nikkos knelt by my side, his wings drooping behind him. He looked from me to Aurora. “Do you mind if I look?”

I nodded when Aurora looked to me. Actually, I didn't mind at all. After we lost Tari, my mother had become the family healer, though she had no magical gifts. She was good at making poultices, and I had never paid enough attention to remember what herbals went into them.

Nikkos pushed up Aurora’s sleeve, frowning at the wound. “It looks infected.”

I gasped when he twisted her arm to show me. The area was even more swollen than before.

Aurora winced, trying to pull away. “It hurts.”

Nikkos loosened his hold on her arm. “Will you let me clean it out and heal it?”

She looked to me again.

“You’re a healer?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “I inherited some of my mother’s green witch powers.”

Blissfully unaware of personal space, Ember leaned against him. “Our mama is a green witch.”

He smiled down at her. “Is she? I thought she was a white witch.”

The girls gave me confused looks.

“All white witches start out as another color,” I said to them. “Your mother was a green witch last we saw her, but her powers were growing, and she may be a white witch by now.”

“Can you talk to animals and heal people when they’re dying?” Ember asked him. “Our mama can.”

My heart ached at how she referred to her mama in present tense, at how easily she accepted that Tari was alive. I prayed it was so, and that Malvolia’s goons didn’t kill her.

“No,” he said as he unfastened a leather satchel, “but I can heal cuts so that you don’t need stitches.” He pulled out a flask, a bowl and pestle, and three velvet bags that smelled like herbs.

After he ground up the herbs and then added water until it was a sticky paste, he looked back at Aurora. “I’m going to have to clean your wound and add a poultice first. I’ll try to be gentle, but it might hurt.”

“That’s okay.” She sniffled, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. “I’m brave.”

“You are.” Nikkos gave her the sweetest smile, and my heart felt like it was going to flutter right out of my chest. I could hardly reconcile the fact that this kind Fae served an evil queen.

Aurora only shook a little when Nikkos cleaned the wound by pouring water over it, but she pulled back when he scooped up the poultice and tried to smear it on her cut. “Ewee. It stinks.”

“Medicine usually does,” he said with a laugh before his smile faded. “But after I finish, I bet I can find some ginger candy in my bag. Have you ever had ginger candy?”

Aurora’s eyes widened. “No. What’s it taste like?”

“A little tangy,” he said, licking those full, kissable lips, “a little sweet.”

Aurora’s eyes dazzled with starlight. “I like sweets.”

Nikkos hovered over her cut. “If you’re a brave girl, I’ll give you a piece.”

Ember tugged on his wing. “I like sweets, too.”

He looked down at her. “Ember, right?”

She nodded.

“Ember,” he said with a wink, “if you would like to be my helper, I’ll give you a piece of candy, too.”

Ember bit her lip, nodding in my direction. “Auntie says I’m a good helper.” She set her doll on the stone slab. “Stay here, Bethamy,” she said to her doll, her brow creasing. “Mommy has work to do.” She turned back to Nikkos with a serious expression. “I’m ready.”

Nikkos smiled. “Hold this bowl for me, please”—he handed her the bowl of medicine—“and don’t spill it.”

She wrinkled her nose as she held the bowl away from her.

I held Aurora’s hand as Nikkos dabbed her cut with the poultice.

Aurora let out a hiss and dug her fingers into my palm. “Ouch.”

“Sorry, Aurora.” Nikkos’s brows drew together as he focused on getting the poultice into the cut. “This part is almost over.”

Ember clutched her bowl like it would explode if she dropped it. “I’m mad at Pappo and Yaya.”

I leaned into her while continuing to hold Aurora’s hand. “So am I, baby.”

“How will Mommy find us?” Ember asked.

I cast Nikkos a wary glance, fearing he and his brothers wouldn’t pass up the chance to kill Tari. “We will have to find her,” I said, trying to sound reassuring.

Nikkos wiped his hand on a cloth and then gave Aurora a somber look. “I need to heal the cut now. Don’t be afraid of my flame. It’s healing fire.”

Aurora’s brow scrunched as she pulled away from him. “Healing fire?”

“Yes.” He held up his hand and teal-blue flame sprouted from his fingers like water shooting out of a spout. “See?” He waved his hand across his arm. “It doesn’t hurt.”

Both girls gasped and then squealed in delight.

“Pappo doesn’t have blue fire,” Ember exclaimed.

He held out one hand to her while the other continued to sprout flame. “Let me see your arm.”

She looked to me again, and I nodded. Then she gave him her arm and giggled when he ran the blue flame over it.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked as he continued making passes across the wound.

“No,” she said, peering at him from beneath her lashes. “It’s cold.”

“Feels good, though, right?”

“Yeah.” She leaned into him, mesmerized by the flame. “I like it.”

“Can I touch it?” Ember asked.

When Nikkos nodded, Ember shoved the bowl into my hands and quickly jutted both hands into the flame. She pulled back with a giggle. “It doesn’t hurt at all!”

I set the bowl down and grabbed Ember’s hands when she tried again. “That’s enough, Em. Let him heal your sister.”

Ember pouted.

“Was your mama a good witch?” Aurora asked him.

He bit his lip while continuing to run flames across her arm. “I was just a baby when she died, but Blaze and Drae told me she was the best witch.”

“Could she heal people and talk to animals?” Ember asked, invading his personal space again by leaning against him.

He shook his head. “Her magic was different.”

“What could she do?” Aurora asked.

“Her powers were extremely rare,” he said with a smile in his voice. “She helped Ravini and Sidhe Fae have babies.”

Ember wrinkled her nose. “How?”

My heart clenched when shadows passed over his eyes.
“I’m not sure.”

“I’ve heard of your mother,” I blurted. “She’s the reason Tari and I were born. Our parents tried for over thirty years to conceive.”

He cleared his throat. “Many Ravini and Sidhe struggled with fertility until my mother came into her powers.”

“They called it the ‘Fertilis,’” I said, recalling what my parents had told me. “It lasted only a few years, but so many Fae babies were born during that time.” I wanted to tell him their mother was an amazing Fae and how sorry I was they lost her, but I had a sinking feeling they still blamed my parents for her death.

“Hold still while I clean off your arm,” Nikkos said to Aurora, flashing a smile that didn’t mask the sadness in his eyes. “Then I’ll get you and your sister some candy.”

My nieces squealed, bouncing up and down.

“Aurora, hold still,” I reminded her.

She instantly went still while Nikkos poured water onto a cloth and wiped the remnants of the poultice from her arm.

“Look, Auntie!” she said, holding out her arm.

To my surprise and delight, the festering wound was gone, replaced by perfectly smooth skin.

Nikkos dug into his bag and pulled out a sack, pouring out what looked like two orange-colored crystal rocks into his palm. He gave one to each girl, and they plopped them in their mouths, their grins stretched nearly ear to ear.

“What do you say?” I reminded them.

“Thank you!” they said in unison.

“My pleasure,” Nikkos said, then he grunted when Aurora slammed into him and kissed his arm.

Both girls dashed away, hopping from rock to rock while sucking on their candy.

“Be careful you don’t choke!” I called to them.

I was keenly aware of Nikkos watching me while I watched the girls. Finally, I returned his stare, relieved to see no judgment reflecting in his eyes. “Thank you for taking care of her.”

“You don’t need to thank me.” He stood and held out the bag. “Do you want some candy, too?”

I waved the bag away. “No, thanks.” Truthfully, I wanted a piece but decided to save it for the girls. No doubt, they’d go through what was left of his candy before our journey was over.

“I take back what I said about you,” Ember called from the other end of the cave. “I don’t think you’re bad men, anymore.”

Nikkos splayed a hand across his heart. “I’m honored you don’t think we’re bad.”

I laughed. “All it took was a little candy.”

“No,” Ember called back. “My friends say they’re not bad now that they aren’t going to kill us.”

I grimaced at that.

Nikkos gave me a look. “Her friends?” He turned his gaze to Ember, who was whispering into the darkness. “Is she a spirit talker?”

“Possibly,” I said. “Until tonight I thought her friends were imaginary.” I still had to have a talk with Ember about those friends of hers, but now was not the time, not in front of my mates, anyway. Based on my limited experiences with other Fae, they treated clairvoyants as the pariahs of the magical world. I wouldn’t expose her to their censure.

Nikkos arched a brow. “They warned her we were coming?”

I bit my lip, worried he’d judge her. “Yes.”

“I’m glad they did.” Dragging his hands through his hair, he let out a long breath. “I don’t think you would’ve forgiven

us if we'd killed your parents.”

Heat coiled in my chest and spread through my veins. Not only did Nikkos not pass judgment on my niece, but he was actually relieved he didn't kill my parents. He was so opposite his older brother, and I knew I could easily learn to love a mage like him. “Too bad Draevyn doesn't feel like you do.”

He shrugged. “I'm sure he does.”

I shook my head, ire pounding a nail in my skull. “He told me I took away the chance to kill your parents' murderers.”

He sat beside me on the stone slab, concern marring his brow. “He did?”

I felt compelled to scoot away, put a little distance between us, not because I was afraid, but I was terrified of my reaction to him. His mouth had fallen open, and I didn't trust myself not to test the softness of those kissable lips or trace a finger around his chest's swirling flame tattoos.

“I'm sorry about your parents, but nobody can lie when I use my siren voice.” I twisted the hem of my robe in my lap, and I suddenly realized how very important Nikkos's trust meant to me. “My parents might be horrible, but they didn't kill your parents.” I took a chance and looked into his eyes, a golden brown like warm honey, so relieved when I didn't see judgment reflecting back at me.

“Did you explain this to Drae?” he asked.

My heart felt like it was imploding as I recalled that nightmare flight in his arms, and my stomach churned at the thought of doing it all over again tomorrow. I wasn't about to let him carry my nieces, which meant he'd have to carry me again. Goddess help me. “He doesn't believe me.”

“We'll talk to him,” Blaze said as he dumped an armful of firewood just inside the mouth of the cavern.

These mages certainly knew how to sneak up on me. Maybe I'd been too absorbed in our conversation, but I hadn't heard or noticed Blaze land.

I gave Blaze an appreciative smile, and my heart fluttered when he smiled back. That feral gleam in his eyes would've unnerved me hadn't he already told me he felt a need to protect me.

"What happened to Aurora's arm?" Nikkos asked.

I averted my gaze, watching my nieces as they hopped from one slab to another. "She had an accident."

"It wasn't an accident, Auntie," Aurora called to me. "You cut a stone out of my arm." Dragon balls. I didn't want these mages knowing about Aurora's teleporting abilities. Not until I knew I could trust them. I didn't want them to try to stop us if we needed to make a quick escape.

Blaze gave me a curious look. "A stone?"

"Aurora," I warned her, forcing myself to look away from Blaze's hard stare. "Not another word."

"Why, Auntie?" she pressed.

That child. Ugh. "Because, I said," I snapped, feeling like I'd suffocate from Nikkos and Blaze's heat as they hovered too close to me.

"Because your aunt doesn't trust us, and she doesn't want us to know about your magic." Draevyn sauntered into the cavern, his wings pinned behind him, his eyes as cold as a winter's frost as he clutched a dead bird by its limp neck. "I assume it was a Tao stone."

I turned up my chin, refusing to cower at the look of hatred reflecting in his eyes. "I thought you were supposed to be on watch."

"I am." He shrugged then tossed the bird to Nikkos. "And for the record"—he sneered in my direction—"I don't trust you, either."

Rage boiled my blood, and it took every ounce of willpower not to order him to fall on a sword, but that would've made me evil, and I wasn't a bad witch, no matter what my parents thought.

"Drae," Blaze warned, balling up his fists.

Draevyn spun on his brother with a snarl. “What?”

Blaze refused to back down, standing toe-to-toe with his brother, his nostrils flaring like a dragon about to pounce on a lamb. “Enough.”

The girls ran to me, clinging to my back while peering over my shoulders. My breath caught in my throat. I didn’t want to use my siren voice to stop them, but if they came to blows, I might not have a choice.

I cleared my throat. “Please remember there are children present.”

Blaze stepped away from Draevyn and mouthed an apology to me.

“Outside,” Draevyn snarled at his brothers. “Both of you.”

Nikkos tossed the dead bird on a nearby rock. “After I take care of Shirina and the girls.” He glared sideways at Draevyn. “And after you cool down.”

Draevyn swore and stomped out of the cavern like a toddler being sent to time out.

Blaze rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “I’m sorry about his behavior.”

“You don’t need to make excuses for him,” I answered, “but I thank you for defending me.”

“Of course.” His throat bobbed when he spoke.

He wasn’t fooling when he said he had a need to protect me, and I suddenly realized how much I liked Blaze and Nikkos. They were nothing like their other brother.

“Do your friends think Draevyn is bad, Em?” I whispered to my niece over my shoulder. “Because I do.”

She nodded.

Nikkos shared a look with Blaze. “He’s not normally like this.”

Trollshit. I had a feeling they had become so accustomed to his moods that they’d learned to tolerate him, hence the way

Draevyn had thrown the bird to Nikkos, just expecting him to skin it. Not so much as a 'please' or 'thank you.' Well, that didn't mean I had to put up with that kind of treatment.

"It's okay," I said. "The girls and I need to sleep."

Ember tugged on my sleeve. "I'm not tired, Auntie."

I turned to my niece. Her eyes were indeed heavy with fatigue and darkened with shadows. She blinked at me then stifled a yawn.

"Em." I took her hand in mine. "We need to rest."

Aurora pouted. "I want more candy."

Feeling a sudden headache coming on, I gritted my teeth. "No more candy."

The girls whined.

I closed my eyes, slowly counting to three.

"Your auntie is right."

I opened my eyes to see Nikkos giving my nieces a stern look, his arms crossed and his wings pulled back. "You need rest. If you're good girls, I'll give you each another sweet tomorrow."

Aurora jumped to her feet. "We'll be good."

I mouthed my thanks to Nikkos. It was nice having backup. Usually, my parents caved and gave in when the children whined, making me out to be the bad aunt.

Blaze and Nikkos each dug into their bags and pulled out rolled-up pallets.

"This is all we have to sleep on," Blaze said as he pushed the two pallets together, close enough to the fire that we could still feel the warmth, but not risk embers igniting our makeshift bed.

"It's fine." I knelt on the pallets, beckoning the girls to join me. "But what will you sleep on?"

"Don't worry about us." Blaze ruffled his wings. "We have our feathers to keep us comfortable."

“Thank you.” I did my best to fluff up the pallets. The makeshift beds were thin, filled with a single layer of what felt like feathers. I wondered if they’d used their own feathers. All of my family’s mattresses and pillows were made from my father’s feathers. My mother collected them after every molt.

Aurora jutted her hands on her hips, frowning down at the pallets like my mother scowling at our feeble attempt to make our bed. “You don’t have blankets?”

Nikkos scratched the back of his head, the color rising in his cheeks. “No, sorry.”

“They don’t need blankets,” I said to my niece while wiping a smudge of dirt from her nose. “They use their wings like Pappo does.”

“Oh.” Ember knelt next to me, her doll once again tucked under her arm as she batted large eyes at my mates. “Can you sleep with us and keep us warm?”

“No, Em,” I blurted, embarrassment flushing my cheeks. I stifled a groan, too afraid to look in my mates’ direction. I wasn’t ready to share a bed with them yet, even if we had two children between us.

“Why not?” Aurora asked. “Pappo keeps Yaya warm with his wings.”

“Come here, darling.” I held out my arms to her, keenly aware that my mates had gone eerily still. Were they as mortified as me at the prospect of sharing a bed? Elements, I still couldn’t look at them, and I feared I’d combust if my face got any hotter. “I will keep you warm.”

She frowned. “You don’t have feathers.”

“Of course not.” Nervous laughter erupted from my throat as my unsuspecting nieces continued to drag me down another level of awkward. “Only Ravini males have wings. You know that.”

“That’s not fair.” Ember pouted. “Why don’t we get wings?”

“No more questions, girls.” I punched the pallet in a futile attempt to fluff it. I loved my nieces, but after our trying day, I was clinging to my last thread of patience. “We need to get some sleep.”

Nikkos knelt beside us. “Do you need anything else?”

I made the mistake of looking into his honey-gold eyes, and then my gaze drifted lower to those kissable lips. Elements, he was too cute. I’ve never been attracted to a man this much—ever. “You’ve done so much already.”

“Okay.” Blaze thumbed behind him, shadows falling over his eyes. “We have to go beat some sense into our brother.”

“Please don’t fight,” I pleaded.

“Don’t worry.” Blaze offered me a playful smirk, even as smoke curled from his fingers. “We won’t kill him.”

“I’m sorry about your parents, too.” Nikkos stood, his wings drooping by his sides. His hands clenched and opened, and I had a feeling he’d take me in his arms and kiss me senseless if I asked him to. “I know they’ve broken your trust, and I don’t blame you for not trusting us yet.”

I didn’t know how to answer that, but I was overwhelmed with gratitude that he understood my concern.

“Trust is earned,” Blaze added, “and we’ll do everything to earn it.”

My throat constricted at the look of sincerity reflecting in both of their eyes, and though my parents hadn’t told me much about mating bonds, I wondered what would happen if I bonded with Nikkos and Blaze and rejected their brother. I wasn’t sure if rejecting one and accepting two was an option. One thing I knew for certain, I wasn’t about to join my body and soul with a Fae like Draevyn, no matter how much I liked his brothers.

* * *

Nikkos Inferni

Ever watchful for threats, I flew after my brothers’ scent, soaring through the darkness like the bow of a ship cutting

through inky waters. Moonlight reflected off the tops of the massive pines below, setting their limbs aglow, and reminding me just how insignificant and small I was in proportion to this side of the Periculian mountain range. Everything was bigger in the land of the giant trolls, from the trees with pine needles as thick as blades to the animals that were easily four times the size of their northern cousins. Even the air itself felt bigger, each breath filling my lungs with a heaviness that weighed me down. I gave a start when a squirrel the size of a large dog jumped below me from one thick tree limb to another, making an aggravated grunt when I flew by. Only in the heart of the Periculian Mountains would I be frightened of a squirrel.

I landed on another ledge far above the cavern, worrying that we'd wandered too far from Shirina and the girls. Though I knew my brothers had already checked for threats, I also scanned the area, scenting the air for the smell of troll dung. Luckily, I smelled nothing but the strong scents of pine and earth. The occasional bird chirped and more squirrels rustled in the trees. The animals usually went silent when trolls were nearby. They didn't seem alarmed that my brothers were already engaged in a heated discussion.

Blaze paced the ledge, his wings arched back, his feathers standing on end. "What in flame is the matter with you, Drae?"

Drae threw up his hands, sparks flying from his fingers. "We had them in our sights, and she wouldn't let us kill them."

"They're her parents!"

"What about *our* parents?" Drae smacked his chest, the anguish in his voice a palpable thing. "Where's *their* justice?"

I almost felt sorry for our brother. Almost. I didn't remember our parents. Drae did. He'd been just seven years old when he'd been forced to fill our father's role and help raise his two younger brothers. For that, I'd always be grateful, but that didn't excuse the way he was treating our mate now.

Our mate.

I could hardly believe it.

I'd been so focused on training in Malvolia's army, I hadn't given the opposite sex much thought, other than the occasional visits to Delfi's most illustrious brothel—and even then, I'd been focused on my needs, not theirs.

But now all that changed, because the elements had somehow deemed me worthy of a mate, a beautiful, powerful witch, and I wasn't about to let our big brother blow it.

I cleared my throat, summoning the nerve to challenge my brother. Not that I was afraid of Drae. I could hold my own against any of my brothers. But Drae had been the closest thing to a father I'd ever had. Even though he was clearly in the wrong, I couldn't shake the stab of guilt for going against him. “They said they didn't kill our parents, that Malvolia killed them.”

Drae's gaze snapped to mine, and there was no hiding the censure in his eyes. “And you believe them, that our queen is capable of such cruelty?”

“Shirina does.” I shrugged. “She believes people can't lie when she uses her siren voice.”

Drae shook his head, his sneer deepening. “Then she's a fool.”

Before I could react, Blaze jutted a foot forward, raising his fists. “Mind how you talk about our mate.”

I flanked Blaze, glaring at our oldest brother. “And how you talk *to* our mate.”

Drae crossed his arms, his pose too casual. I didn't trust his smirk, knowing a sleeping dragon lie beneath that façade. “Or what?”

Smoke curled from Blaze's fingers. “Or I'll beat that smirk off your face.”

Drae threw back his head with a laugh. “I'd like to see you try.”

One moment, the fire flashed in Blaze's eyes, and the next Drae's head flew back, blood spraying from his nose after Blaze punched him. Drae knew better than to challenge Blaze.

No Ravini was as fast as our brother. His speed was supernatural, a gift from the elements.

Drae's wings flapped erratically, and he almost landed on his ass. His bloody nose was already swelling as he charged Blaze with a roar. "You flaming prick!"

"Enough!" I jumped between them, slapping their chests with my wings. "We need to be on our guard out here. Don't forget we're in troll territory."

"Is that how you want to start out our relationship with our mate?" Blaze hollered as I pushed him back. "By killing her parents?"

Drae cradled his nose, his eyes flashing with despair. "I never asked for a mate."

"Too bad!" Blaze snarled, baring his sharp incisors. "The elements blessed us with one anyway."

Drae shook his head, his wings drooping. "You mean cursed us?"

Blaze looked at my brother as if he'd grown a second head. "You haven't even given her a chance."

Drae walked to the ledge, staring down into the dark forest below. "And I'm not going to."

I gaped at my oldest brother. Could he really be such a fool?

Blaze paced the ledge, snarling like a cornered animal. "You're a special kind of stupid, you know that?"

I mumbled my agreement. Despite what Shirina's parents were, their daughter was absolutely perfect, and not just because of her long dark hair, moss-colored eyes that shone like jewels, flawless honey-kissed skin, or her generous curves. She was kind and compassionate. Anyone could see that by the way she cared for her nieces. Why couldn't Drae?

"Why?" Drae spun on us both, moonlight painting the tips of his inky wings with an ethereal white glow, reminding me too much of a painting of our father that hung in the great hall.

“Because I don’t want to bond with the woman whose parents murdered our parents?”

“They wronged her, too,” I reminded him. “They took her sister from her, and they were about to take her memories.”

I fought the urge to look away when thunderclouds darkened his eyes. “You realize her sister is the white witch who was prophesized to kill our queen?”

“She won’t kill our queen now,” Blaze cut in.

I cut a look to my brother. “How do you know?”

His smirk made my blood run cold. “Because we have her children.”

I turned on him with a snarl. “You can’t be serious?”

He leaned against the side of the mountain, picking grime from his nails as if he hadn’t a care in the world. “Why not?”

There was no question that out of the three of us, Blaze was the most cunning. He always found a way out of impossible situations, but there were times, like now, when I worried that his schemes blurred the lines between right and wrong. “They’re children!”

Drae looked at Blaze with interest as he pinched the bridge of his bleeding nose. “We told Shirina we wouldn’t take them to Malvolia.”

“And we won’t,” Blaze answered.

Ice pricked my veins. I didn’t like the gleam in Blaze’s eyes. “What is your plan?” I asked, then held my breath, fearing his answer.

“Shirina is already angry with her parents,” he said. “It won’t take much to turn her against them and convince her to join our cause.”

Drae leaned toward him, his keen eyes homing in on him like a predator assessing his prey. “And then what?”

Blaze flashed a triumphant grin. “And then she will willingly go to Delfi and pledge her allegiance to our queen.”

And there it was—proof of my brother’s insanity.

Drae rubbed the stubble on his chin. “You know, it might work.”

“Are you both insane?” I glared at my brothers. “And let the children become pawns in this war?”

“Our queen won’t hurt them,” Blaze said, sounding far too confident.

I loved our queen, I did, but the way my older brothers practically worshipped her made my veins solidify with unease.

“How do you know?” I pressed.

“Have you ever known her to hurt children?” he asked me.

“She put a price on Flora’s head when she was pregnant, and on her unborn children,” I reminded him.

“That was different,” Blaze answered, his features hard, unmoving. “One of them was prophesized to kill her.”

I let out an exasperated breath. “They were still babies!”

“Shirina and the girls are Malvolia’s family, too,” Drae said, “and they weren’t prophesized to kill her, only the white witch.”

The white witch. Tarianya. Shirina’s twin. Ember and Aurora’s mother. Yet, my brothers spoke of her as if she was a nameless, faceless person. “We don’t know Shirina isn’t a white witch,” I cut in. Maybe they didn’t care about what happened to Tarianya, but certainly they would care about the fate of our mate.

“Did you see her use white magic?” Blaze asked me.

“No, but—”

“Her sister has already used white magic to kill several of our fire mages,” Blaze interrupted.

My shoulders caved inward as I looked at both of my brothers. How had this happened? Blaze and I had come here

to defend Shirina. Now it seemed I was the only brother who cared for her safety. “What if Shirina is right? What if her parents aren’t lying. What if Malvolia killed our parents?”

Drae snarled at me like a cornered, wounded animal. “Now who’s the special kind of stupid?”

I should’ve known better than to suggest our queen could be capable of murder when my brothers had their heads so far up her ass.

“There were witnesses, Nikkos,” Blaze said to me, fire flashing in his eyes. “Flora and Derrick killed our parents when they refused to hide them.”

“Are you forgetting Malvolia thought she captured and beheaded Flora and Derrick, but clearly she didn’t?” I asked him.

Blaze nodded. “She obviously killed their decoys.”

I gave him a long, cool look, wondering if he was being willfully ignorant. “And what if those same decoys killed our parents?”

“Maybe,” Blaze said, “but why didn’t the decoys confess they weren’t Flora and Derrick before they were executed?”

The vein above my left brow began to throb. “Maybe they thought they were Flora and Derrick.”

Drae shook his head, snickering. “How?”

A thought occurred to me—Flora’s friend, the mind spinner! “Maybe their memories had been changed.”

“The mind spinner?” Blaze paced the ledge, looking lost in thought.

“He was Flora’s friend,” Drae said. “Maybe she had him do it. She obviously has no issues using him to erase her daughter’s memories.”

I heaved a groan, hanging my head in my hands. “This is starting to hurt my head.”

“Look at the evidence.” Blaze’s eyes lit up like they were swimming in starlight. “We’ve only known our queen to be

kind, despite her sister's betrayal. Have Flora and Derrick been kind to their family? And why do you think they erased their daughter's memories?"

What kind of monster had I created? I should've never brought up the mind spinner. "I don't know."

"Because she refused to go along with their plans to overthrow Malvolia," Drae answered for me. "They resorted to changing her memories so they could control her and her magic."

My heart felt like it would implode as I stared into my brothers' eager faces. They were going to go through with their plan to persuade Shirina to join Malvolia's forces. No doubt our queen would love to have a witch with the siren's call on her side. Then what? Would our mate have to go to battle against her twin?

"Maybe," I finally answered, "but we cannot be sure."

Blaze threw out his hands, his wings snapping open. "Open your eyes, brother."

I dragged a hand down my face, the breath expelling from my lungs. "I'm tired. I'm going to sleep."

Blaze grabbed my elbow, his eyes as sharp as blade points. "You know I'm right."

"What I know is the elements have chosen Shirina as our mate for a reason, and I don't want either of you breaking her trust in us." I shook him off me. "And I don't want her stuck in the middle of this war." Disgust rung in my words. "Speaking of our mate, we've left her alone long enough. I'm going back to her."

"Wait." Drae snatched my shoulder, an expectant look in his eyes. "Aren't you going to heal my nose?"

"No." I backed away from him with a sneer. "Let the pain remind you not to treat our mate with disrespect."

Chapter Five

Shirina Avias

A sharp pain in my stomach startled me awake. After I extricated a tiny elbow from my gut and gently nudged Aurora away, I blinked up at the cavern ceiling above me, smoke from the dying fire curling toward the rough stone. It took me a moment to remember where I was and what had happened, but then my eyes filled with tears as memories came rushing back. My parents had betrayed us, Tari was alive, and my three fated mates, Malvolia's fire mages, had tried to kill my parents. A shiver raced across my bones, and I sat up, wrapping my arms around myself. My nieces were snuggled in my cloak, and the morning was especially cool. I looked outside the cavern opening as pink threads of morning sunlight illuminated our small space in a soft glow.

I worried what might have happened to my mates. Had they gone hunting for breakfast, or had they abandoned us to go kill my parents? A shiver of dread coursed up my spine at the thought. But, no, Nikkos and Blaze wouldn't abandon us. Draevyn, maybe, but not his brothers.

My racing heart slowed and then picked up again when I spotted two winged silhouettes flying in our direction. Vain as I was, I quickly swept back my hair before pinching my cheeks and pressing my lips together to add more color. How I wished I had a comb and a clean change of clothes. My heart fluttered faster when I could make out the smiling faces of Nikkos and Blaze.

They landed with such grace, barely making a sound as their feet touched the ground. Tucking back their massive wings, they ducked into the cavern. My stomach rumbled when I saw Blaze carried a net with two big, fat fish.

"Good morning," Nikkos said to me, beaming as he heaped more wood onto the fire. "Sleep well?"

I looked down at my sleeping nieces, their little mouths open, and their arms and legs sprawled wide while they gently

snored.

“As good as I could,” I said to him. “You?”

He rolled his head and shoulders, his thick arms and chest flexing with the movement. “It was nice to give my wings a rest.”

“Thank you for carrying us,” I said, biting my lip. “I know it makes flying harder.”

He laughed at that. “The girls weigh no more than a bag of feathers.” He wagged his brows. “I’m looking forward to getting a turn carrying you, though.”

Heat flooded my face at that. I would love to have Nikkos carry me, though I would be far too tempted to kiss those full lips. Plus, I feared my nieces would be miserable if Draevyn carried them. I didn’t trust him to be kind, which meant I’d probably be stuck with him the entire trip. The thought of being held by him again made my stomach churn with unease.

Blaze set the fish net on a stone slab and threw a burst of flame at the dwindling fire. The girls stirred when the blast of heat hit us. Ember was the first to wake. Eyes heavy with sleep, she crawled across her sister and climbed into my lap. I rocked her in my arms, stroking her hair while watching the men prepare the fish.

My mouth watered when Nikkos pulled a pan and a grate out of his bag and seasoned the fish with oil and spices. Blaze pulled out a loaf of crusty bread and a tin of what I hoped was jam. The girls would be thrilled.

Aurora sat up, her nostrils flaring while the fish cooked in oil.

“I’m hungry,” she said, rubbing her belly.

“I’m working on it,” Nikkos said with a wink.

Blaze put three slices of bread on a plate and slathered them with what turned out to be honey.

“Who wants some bread?” he asked.

“Me!” Ember scrambled off my lap, acting as if she hadn’t eaten in weeks.

“Aren’t you having any?” I asked when he handed us the plate.

He shook his head. “We ate below.”

“Below?” I asked.

“There’s a clear stream below the mountain,” he said. “We’ve already scanned the area for threats. We’ll take you there after breakfast.”

I nodded at that, then swallowed back my unease, realizing Draevyn was probably at the stream.

Nikkos handed me a bladder of water. “Sorry, we only have water.”

“Water’s fine,” I said. It’s not like the girls and I were used to anything better. We occasionally drank tea when my father was able to get some from the satyrs, but the tea leaves were usually stale.

We shared the water, and I took the smallest piece of bread while my nieces gobbled theirs down, not even waiting for the fish.

The bread tasted far better than my mother’s hard oat cakes. The honey was sublime, mildly sweet with a hint of lavender, and the fish was seasoned perfectly with a delicious flaky and buttery crust. After we finished breakfast, I gathered my cloak and my mates rolled up their bedrolls and started putting out the fire.

The girls stood, dusting crumbs off their dresses. Then they grasped hands, sharing serious looks, and I knew they were speaking telepathically. Elements help me, they were plotting something.

Tugging her sister behind her, Aurora went to Blaze, grasping his fingers while offering him a shy smile. “May we please have more bread and honey?”

Blaze smiled down at her, patting her head. “No, sorry. We have to conserve until we get home.”

I heaved a sigh when both girls pouted.

“You’ve had enough to eat,” I reprimanded.

Aurora hung her head. “Yes, Auntie.”

Blaze went back to putting out the fire.

But then Nikkos knelt beside them, pure kindness reflecting in his eyes. “We’ll be at our estate in a few days, and Cook will make us cakes, tarts, and all kinds of pies.”

The girls perked up at that. “Really?”

He smiled. “Yes, really.”

Aurora scratched the back of her head. “What’s a tart?”

He gave me a funny look as if my nieces had been raised by trolls. “It’s a sweet pastry.”

“What’s a pastry?” Ember asked him.

He slowly stood, pity reflected in his eyes. “Trust me, you’ll like them.”

Aurora crossed her arms, her brows drawn in an adorable but serious expression. “Will there be tea?”

“All kinds of tea,” he answered.

“Will it be stale?” Ember pressed.

Blaze laughed, and Nikkos shot him a glare before turning back to my nieces. He scratched his chin, a slight smile tugging at his lips. “No, why?”

“Pappo only gets us stale tea,” Ember answered.

Nikkos gave me a sort of hopeless look. I could only shrug while hiding a smile behind my hand.

“I promise the tea won’t be stale,” he said to them, “and you can sweeten it with cream and sugar.”

When they both squealed their delight, Nikkos turned from them with a sigh. The poor hapless Fae thought they were done with him, but I knew they were just getting warmed up.

“But sugar’s expensive!” Aurora protested.

Nikkos made a noise that sounded like surrender.

Blaze laughed out loud.

“Girls, enough,” I said to them before turning to my mates. “We’re not used to much, in case you couldn’t tell by the shack we lived in.”

When my mates looked me over, I felt like crawling out of my own skin as they stared at my worn and patched skirt, pity reflected in their eyes.

I fought the urge to run when both brothers bridged the distance to me.

“I’m sorry,” Nikkos said as he stopped just a breath away, the heat radiating off his body reminding me of the flames he could summon at will. “All that’s about to change. Once we bring you to our estate, you’ll be treated like the princesses you are.”

I swallowed at that, not sure which unnerved me more—his warmth that enveloped me like an invisible hug, or the pity reflecting in his eyes.

“We don’t need fine things.” I took a step back. “We just need to be safe.”

Blaze followed my retreat. “We’ll give you both.”

Both men were so big, their massive wings blocking my view of the girls, and Blaze had a predatory gleam in his eyes that set my soul on fire. “Thank you.” I smoothed my hands down my dress. “We should get going.”

“Yes.” Blaze cleared his throat. “Let’s go. You ready?” he asked me while holding out his arms.

I nodded. “Are you carrying me?”

“I am.” He slanted a smile that rivaled the very devil himself. “I won the coin toss.”

“Coin toss?” I asked, then gasped when he swept me into his arms.

The girls squealed in delight when Nikkos lifted them into his arms.

“Hold on tight,” I called to the girls.

“I won’t drop them,” Nikkos said with a wink.

Before I could protest, Blaze raced for the ledge and jumped into the sky, and I was hit by a blast of frigid morning air. But it was a welcome relief to the heat flooding my face and the fire radiating off his solid chest, making me want to melt in his arms while he stared at me with those piercing, dark eyes. Elements save me, I was falling hard and fast for my mates—two of them, anyway.

* * *

This forest was so different from the one by our home. The trees were at least three times in height and width, their branches sagging with needles that were as big as blades. The scents here were stronger, too, the moss covering the forest floor more pungent, and the thick air weighed down my gown. Each step was heavier, harder, and I felt more insignificant than a mouse. I didn’t feel comfortable here, especially not when a squirrel the size of our old hound bound past us and went up the nearest tree.

The girls and I relieved ourselves behind one of those thick trees before heading to the stream. Scowling, I scrubbed sticky honey off the girls’ hands and faces. I tossed a glance over my shoulder to where my mates were waiting for us. Nikkos and Blaze casually sat beside what was left of the fire, picking food from their teeth. Draevyn, however, stood staring at us, an impatient look in his eyes, which was exactly why I decided to scrub the girls’ faces a little longer.

I left the girls standing on a wide stone slab at the edge of the stream while I knelt beside them and washed my face.

I sat up, drying my face, noting how the girls had edged closer to the water. “Girls, don’t get wet.” Shafts of morning light pierced my eyes as I squinted at them. “I don’t have a change of clothes for you.” I tensed while watching the girls hover close to the edge, fearing my warning was like telling a fish not to swim. “Step back toward me.” I held out a hand.

I inwardly swore when Ember slipped off the slab and fell up to her ankles in water. Aurora tried to help her out and ended up slipping into the water, too. They both giggled, which told me it was no accident.

“What did I say?” I scolded them.

Hand in hand, they climbed out of the stream, standing on the stone slab.

Ember blinked up at me with those large puppy eyes. “Sorry, Auntie.”

I scooped her into my arms, her blasted straw doll pinching my stomach as she held it between us. “Stay here until I come back for you,” I said to her sister. “I don’t want you getting your stockings dirty.”

I carried her over to Nikkos and Draevyn. “Could you dry her stockings?” I asked them. Growing up with a fire mage father, he’d dried our clothes and hair more times than I could count.

“Of course,” Nikkos said as he took her from me.

I heaved a frustrated breath. “Thank you.” Just as I turned toward Aurora, I caught Draevyn’s scowl out of the corner of my eye. I fully faced him, surprised to see his nose was swollen and bruised. Had one of his brothers done that? “I could do without the judgmental looks from you,” I spat.

He looked me over as he leaned against a tree, picking food from his teeth. “They’re wild, and you don’t know how to discipline them.”

“Drae,” Blaze growled behind me. “Enough.”

Rage flooded my veins, and I wanted to smack that smug expression from his face. “I didn’t ask for your opinion.”

“Their behavior affects all of us.” Snickering, he shook his head. “Now we’re losing valuable flying time while we wait for their stockings to dry.”

Blaze surged ahead of me, raising his fists. “Do I need to break it again?” he asked through clenched teeth.

I didn't flinch when Draevyn flashed his fangs. I couldn't stop thinking about Blaze. Just when I didn't think I could like him more. Had he punched his brother on my behalf?

"It's fine," I said to Blaze, smiling up at him as I grasped his thick, solid arm. "Will you carry Aurora for me?"

My knees went weak when he looked down at me with that feral gleam in his eyes. "Of course."

I tossed Draevyn one last scowl before turning my back on him and walking with Blaze toward Aurora. I still gripped his muscular arm, his body heat radiating around me like he was my own personal sun. "Thank you," I whispered.

His wing draped over my shoulder, his feathers tickling my skin. "Anything to make you smile."

I'd laughed at suitors who'd used the same silly phrase, and yet when Blaze said it, my spine turned to liquid, and I just wanted him to fly me far away and kiss me senseless.

Aurora had a contrite expression on her little face, her bottom lip hanging low, and her eyes watery. "I'm sorry, Auntie," she said with a snuffle.

I cupped her face and wiped a tear from her eye. "I know, sweetheart."

"Auntie," Aurora said in a hushed whisper. "I don't like him." Aurora's gaze darted to something behind me, and I got the feeling she was looking at Draevyn.

"It's okay," I said to her. "I don't, either."

Blaze cleared his throat. "Come on, sprite." When he held his arms out to her, she jumped toward him with a squeal. My heart felt like it had swelled to thrice the size as I followed him back while he carried her pressed against his chest.

Nikkos sat with Ember on his lap, his hand softly glowing as he held it over her legs. I sat on a log across from my mates, watching while they patiently dried my nieces' stockings. Nikkos gave Ember a black feather, and she twirled it between her fingers. Not to be outdone, Aurora loudly whispered how much she'd like her own feather, so Blaze plucked one from

his wings, handing it to her. Both girls played with their feathers, making them flutter like they were little Ravini soldiers.

Ember tugged on Nikkos's arm. "Bethamy wants a feather, too."

Nikkos hitched his brows. "Who?"

She held up her straw doll. I grimaced when I noticed one leg looked like it was about to fall off. I had no stitching skills, either. Maybe she'd finally let me give the tattered doll a proper burial.

Nikkos looked over at Aurora, who watched the exchange with a frown, and I knew my mates would be constantly plucking feathers in order to appease the girls.

"No more feathers," I cut in. "You will have to share with Bethamy."

"But, Auntie—" Ember whined.

"You heard me. One feather is all you get." I held up a finger, very aware that Draevyn was probably glaring holes through the back of my head while judging my disciplinary skills.

"I've got an idea," Nikkos said with a wink while running a glowing hand over Ember's legs. "Maybe we can get to know each other while we wait for their stockings to dry."

"What do you want to know?" I asked, feeling suddenly self-conscious as both of the kind brothers stared at me, their eyes sharpened with intensity.

"Everything," Nikkos said, his eyes lighting with eagerness.

I blew out a breath, nervous energy buzzing through my veins when Draevyn stood behind his brothers, his arms crossed over his chest. "I don't know where to begin."

"Try asking us a question first," Blaze said.

I tried not to look at Draevyn as I focused on Blaze and Nikkos. "How did you know where to find my parents?"

“We were tracking the white witch when we saw your father fly out of Cyrene,” Blaze said.

I swallowed at that. “My sister?” They were tracking her because they wanted to kill her, too. How was I supposed to reconcile the fact that my mates wanted to kill half of my family?

“Our mommy!” Aurora squealed, clasping her hands together.

Ember giggled, her eyes practically glowing. “Will you find her for us?”

Nikkos and Blaze both blanched. I didn’t dare look at Draevyn, for I wouldn’t be able to contain my rage if he was smirking.

“Sorry, sprite,” Nikkos said to her. “She flew too far away.”

The girls pouted.

“We will find her,” I said to them. “After we find a safe place.”

They both nodded and went back to playing with their feathers.

“I caught a glimpse of her when she was escaping,” Nikkos said. “She was a mousy human with pale hair. She looked nothing like you.”

“My mother has skin shifting magic. No doubt they changed her appearance so nobody would recognize her.” *And her memories*, I thought darkly, *so she wouldn’t even know herself*. How could my parents have been so cruel?

“We’ve heard of Flora Avias’s skin shifting magic.” Nikkos looked from his brothers to me. “I’m certain she and Derrick have left your home and have assumed new bodies.”

I cut Draevyn a dark look when he swore, though I knew my parents had assumed new bodies so as not to be recognized by Malvolia’s mages. Where would they go? Instinct told me they’d head to Peloponese, King Fachnan’s capital city. But

would Tari truly align with that wicked king after what he'd done to shifter-kind?

I swallowed back my sorrow. Tari had been my best friend for so many years. We did everything together, even spoke telepathically, just like Ember and Aurora. How I missed her. "Other than her different body, did she look well?"

Draevyn cleared his throat. "For now, yes."

I shot him an accusatory look. "For now?"

He shrugged. "I'm sorry, but Malvolia has a price on her head."

I inwardly cringed when my nieces gaped at me.

"I assumed that already," I snapped. "I didn't need you to remind me."

Aurora wrinkled her nose. "What is a head price, Auntie?"

"It means Malvolia wants to kill your mommy," Draevyn interrupted before I could get in a word.

"Elements!" I threw up my hands. "Did you have to tell them that?"

"Should I lie to them and keep them ignorant, or should I prepare them for the realities of this brutal world?" His swollen nostrils flared as he glared at me. In that moment, I felt his hatred in my very bones. How could I possibly mate with him?

Ember's eyes watered. "Will the bad queen kill our mommy?"

"No." I cut Draevyn a sharp look. "Your mommy will stop her with her magic." I ignored Draevyn's grumbling and instead looked to Blaze and Nikkos. "Why wait until now to attack my parents?"

Blaze visibly swallowed. "For years we thought Malvolia had executed our parents murd—er." He visibly swallowed, giving me an apologetic look. "Had executed Flora and Derrick, but when the white witch revealed herself, we knew your parents had somehow survived."

“I see.” I chewed on my lip, thinking back to all the times we had to start over in some other part of the forest because my father had feared that Malvolia’s army would find us.

“Tell us about your siren voice.”

My gaze shot to Nikkos. “What about it?” I snapped, not meaning to sound so defensive. It was all Draevyn’s fault for putting me on edge.

He froze like a deer caught in a hunter’s crosshairs. “Your parents were shocked when you used it.”

I released a long breath. I was growing tired of these questions. “That’s because they didn’t know about it.”

“Why not?” Draevyn asked.

I couldn’t bring myself to look at him as I wrapped my arms around myself. I dropped my voice to a low murmur. “I didn’t want them to think I was evil.”

“Why would they think that?” Nikkos asked, his voice laced with confusion.

I swallowed back my sorrow, my gaze flitting to Aurora as an understanding passed between us. She’d felt it, too. Our parents’ eyes had always been on us while they watched, waited for us to turn out like the sorceress queen. “Because my aunt turned evil,” I murmured, digging my fingers into the hem of my cloak.

“Malvolia is not evil,” all three brothers blurted.

The girls gaped at them, then at me. They’d heard the stories about what Malvolia had done to my parents and their friends. They knew what she was, and they were only four. Such a shame these grown mages were blinded by Malvolia’s smoke.

I rolled my eyes. I didn’t want to argue when it was one against three, but I had to make them understand. “My aunt put a price on mine and my sister’s heads when we were still in the womb.” Blaze and Nikkos hung their heads. Only Draevyn had the nerve to meet my glare, his red, swollen nose

reminding me of a flaming coal. “If you don’t think that was evil, there is no point in talking about it.”

Draevyn gave me a pointed look. “How were you able to practice your magic if you didn’t use it around your parents?”

I gritted my teeth, tempted to just tell him to flame off. “I didn’t use it often.”

Nikkos gaped at me. “But it’s so strong.”

I smoothed the wrinkles out of my skirts. “I know it is.”

“Who did you use it on?” Draevyn asked.

“Why so many questions?” I snapped. I wasn’t about to talk about the time I’d discovered the true strength of my magic, not now, not ever. Even after two years, I could still feel their grubby hands all over me, ripping at my clothes, pulling my hair. I shuddered at the memory.

“Is there something wrong with wanting to know more about our mate?” Draevyn asked, condescension dripping off his words.

Was he for real? I laughed out loud. “It is when it’s clear you don’t want to mate with me.”

His mouth fell open. “I never said that.”

I shook my head, frustration pounding a gong in my ears. “You do by your actions.”

His wings snapped open as he scowled down at me like he was reprimanding a child. “You’re avoiding my question.”

“And you’re avoiding my accusation.”

Draevyn threw up his hands, his wings flapping with the movement. “You’re infuriating, you know that?”

I flashed a saccharine smile. “And you’re not?”

“Their stockings feel dry.” Blaze stood, lifting Aurora in his arms while shooting Draevyn a glare. “Are we ready to go?”

I stood, too, wrapping my cape around me. “Yes, thank you.” Then I frowned when I noticed how the girls clung to

Nikkos and Blaze. They didn't want to let their protectors go, and I knew why. They were afraid I'd make them fly with Draevyn. Ugh. I wouldn't subject my nieces to his company, which meant I was stuck with him again.

Blaze crossed over to me, an eager look in his eyes. "Shirina, did you want to fly with me today?" Aurora gave me a pleading look as she wrapped her arms tighter around his neck.

I rubbed her back and kissed her cheek. "Don't worry, baby," I whispered to her. "I won't make you fly with the bad man."

She beamed at me. "Thank you, Auntie."

"As much as I would love to, I can't," I said to Blaze. "As you can see, the girls are frightened of Draevyn."

Blaze's features fell, but he quickly plastered on a smile. "Looks like it's you and me again, sprite," he said to her. "Shall we challenge my brothers to a race?"

She squealed her delight.

I mouthed my thanks to Blaze before going up to Nikkos and Ember, kissing her cheek and thanking Nikkos, too.

Nikkos flashed a devious grin, waggling his brows. "If you're giving out free kisses, I'll take one."

Heat flooded my face and chest. "Not yet. Maybe someday."

"I'll be looking forward to someday," he said with a wink.

I could think of nothing clever to say, especially not as my gut twisted and turned at the thought of spending another day in Draevyn's arms. I trudged toward Draevyn, the weight of his stare growing heavier with each step.

I folded my arms beneath my cloak. "Well, it looks like you're stuck with me again."

"I guess so." He shifted from foot to foot while scratching the back of his head. "I know we haven't been getting along, but—"

“I’d rather we didn’t talk,” I interrupted before he could finish. Haven’t been getting along? Is that what he called behaving like a total dragon’s ass?

He arched a brow. “Is that you asking me or forcing me?”

I turned up my nose, refusing to answer as I stood in front of him, waiting for him to pick me up.

“Fine,” he grumbled before sweeping me in his arms and lurching into the sky, causing me to nearly hurl the contents of my stomach. I didn’t dare complain, fearing he’d do it again. Ugh. It was going to be a long flight.

* * *

Elements, he was infuriating. We’d been flying for hours, and he hadn’t said a word to me. I was starting to regret telling him I didn’t want to talk. We flew over an endless sea of huge trees with the looming Periculian mountain range behind them. This mountain range spread the width of the Fae lands, from the southern shore of Delfi to Caldaria, separating the magical realm from the human world on the other side. Of course, we had humans on our side, usually the lower classes unless they possessed magic, but I’d heard about what happened to Fae on the other side of the mountains, from beheadings to lynchings to boiling in hot oil. If that wasn’t a deterrent enough for Fae to cross the mountains, there were trolls and bad weather, not to mention the haunted forest on the other side.

I shuddered to think what was in that forest. My parents had told me it was infested with all kinds of demons. And to think, I’d once tried to cross that mountain range in search of my sister. It had almost cost me my life. I’d survived, but the mental scarring from that trip still ran deep. What a fool I’d been.

I shook my head, trying to clear it of dark thoughts, instead choosing to focus on my two mates flying ahead of us, especially on their deliciously round bottoms and broad backs while the heavy beating of their wings displaced the air.

Blaze slowed his pace and flew beside us.

Aurora smiled widely as she waved to me. “Isn’t this fun, Auntie?” she called.

I forced a smile but didn’t answer. More like torture being carried in Draevyn’s arms, forced to rely on the heat radiating off his hard, broad chest for warmth while trying not to be entranced by his heady scent: sage and spice and something else I could only define as pure male power. Damn, I wished the bastard wasn’t so alluring.

“What’s the matter, brother?” Blaze called. “That fat nose slowing you down?”

Draevyn shifted me in his arms and flashed Blaze a rude gesture.

Aurora gasped.

I rolled my eyes. “Could you not do that around the children?”

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but then must’ve thought better of it. He clamped his lips shut, his nostrils flaring as he stared ahead. He didn’t need to say a word. The rage in his eyes said enough.

Blaze flew ahead of us again, his laughter echoing behind us. I would have to talk to Blaze later about provoking his brother in front of the children. Elements, taking care of two children was enough work. I didn’t need my mates acting like children, too.

Clenching my hands in my lap, I took a chance and looked into Draevyn’s eyes. His nose looked even bigger than before. I wondered why Nikkos hadn’t healed him. Were they punishing him for his treatment of me?

I fought the urge to touch his nose, though I knew it would probably pain him. “Does it hurt?” I blurted.

“I thought you didn’t want to talk.” When I didn’t answer, he let out a growl. “What do you think?”

I couldn’t help but smile. Served him right.

“Don’t gloat too much.” He loosened his grip on my back and legs. “It’s a long drop from here.”

I gasped, grasping his shoulders. “You would drop me?”

His face colored as he continued to stare straight ahead. “No.”

Rage pulsed across my bones like a living thing. “Then why say it?”

He blew out a breath, tightening his hold on me. “Because you frustrate me.”

“And you infuriate me. Look, I know you don’t want to be my mate. I don’t want to be yours, either.” My chest ached as if I’d plunged a knife through my heart, and each word that dragged from my lips was me twisting that knife. He was my mate. My *mate*. And I wanted to sever the bond. But what choice did I have when he was so cruel to me? “We’re stuck with each other for now, so the least we can do is be civil to each other until we find a way to break whatever this connection is between us.”

Was I imagining things, or did he flinch?

“We can’t break it.”

I gritted my teeth, pushing out the words. “We will find a way. Then you won’t have to put up with me or my spoiled nieces ever again.”

“And what about my brothers?” His voice cracked and splintered like shattered glass. “Are you just going to toss them aside, too?”

We locked gazes for several soul-crushing heartbeats. Was that regret swirling in his eyes? “Of course not.” I felt compelled to look away. “I don’t mind bonding with them, just not you.”

“Where will you live?” His voice dropped to a low rumble. “I’m the Lord of Abyssus.”

I assumed Abyssus was the name of his estate. “I don’t care, so long as I’m far away from you.” I didn’t mean it. I knew that deep in my soul. He was my mate. The elements had chosen him for a reason. But I couldn’t bond with him. *Wouldn’t* bond with him.

“You won’t get far without me.”

I shot him a glare and let out what my mother would’ve called an unladylike snort. “I’ve managed twenty-three years without you. I will do just fine.” I crossed my arms, looking away from him. “Now, if you don’t mind, I don’t want to talk anymore.”

The bastard had the nerve to laugh. When would this torture end?

Chapter Six

The cave my mates chose this time was more like a shallow overhang that stretched for miles, like a long, hollowed out bone that sat just below the flat top of the mountain. The rock formation was white like bone, too. The air here was dryer, making my lips crack and my skin itch. The floating sand particles dried my mouth. I kept running my tongue over the roof of my mouth, trying to get the gritty taste out to no avail. Thankfully, the sun had set, cooling down the ground beneath us, for I suspected it would be warmer here. I didn't care for this stretch of mountains and wouldn't feel love lost for leaving it.

The girls made my heart flutter with unease as they ran up and down the long ledge. Luckily, Nikkos flew after them, staying close by should one of them fall. Nikkos was making it far too easy for me to fall in love with him. After several minutes of running back and forth, Nikkos followed them back while they dragged their feet. I didn't want to look at their stockings. I knew they were filled with holes by now.

We sat around the crackling fire and ate what they said was wild hare, though it was as big as a boar. We were ravenous, though, and finished off the entire thing. I was keenly aware of Draevyn sneaking looks at me while I ate. What was wrong with him? Hadn't he scowled at me enough today?

The girls stretched their arms after supper, sucking on their ginger candies while leaning against my sides.

Aurora stumbled to her feet, rubbing her eyes. "I want to go running again," she said through a yawn.

Nikkos's wings drooped as he shook his head. "I'm too tired to follow you, Ember, and it's time for bed."

Both girls gave him a funny look.

Aurora jutted a thumb in her chest. "I'm Aurora, not Ember."

“Sorry.” Nikkos shrugged. “You two look so much alike, I can’t tell you apart.”

“It’s easy. I have short hair.” Aurora thumbed toward her sister. “Ember has long hair.”

“Aurora is also the more rambunctious one,” I said, smiling down at Ember while squeezing her to my side, “and Ember is always clutching her doll.” My niece leaned on me with heavy-lidded eyes. She sucked her thumb while holding that straw monstrosity in her lap.

Aurora jutted her hands on her hips. “How come you don’t look exactly like your brothers?” she asked Nikkos.

He shared looks with his brothers before answering. “We’re not triplets.”

Aurora scratched her head. “Triplets?”

“Like twins,” I said to her, “plus one more.”

Aurora scrunched her nose. “None of you?”

“No,” Blaze answered. “We were all born three years apart.”

“Yaya told me Ravini Fae babies are rare,” Aurora said.

“They are,” Blaze said with a smile, “but our mother had powerful fertility magic.”

“She blessed my parents once, too,” I said, then cringed, regretting bringing up the people who they believed killed their parents.

Aurora tugged on my sleeve. “Did she bless my parents?”

“No.” I pushed a gritty strand of hair behind her ear. “Your fathers were a different kind of Fae. The shifter Fae produce children more often.”

“Their fathers were shifters?” Blaze asked, his nostrils flaring as if he was scenting them for the first time.

I swallowed back my unease, wondering if maybe it had been a mistake to let my mates know. Many Sidhe and Ravini

Fae were prejudiced against shifters. Then again, if they were prejudiced, then I'd know they weren't the right mates for me.

“Yes.” I gave him a long look, relieved when I saw no judgment in his eyes. Nikkos didn't look alarmed, either. I didn't dare look at Draevyn, for if he so much as looked sideways at my nieces, I wouldn't be able to contain my rage. I pointed to Aurora's mouth. “Can't you tell by their canines?”

She smiled wide, showing off her sharp incisors. Then she let out a little howl that made us all laugh. Thank the elements they weren't old enough to go through their change yet. I knew enough about shifters to know it would be even more challenging raising wolf children. Once they had their first periods, though, they would also inherit the ability to shift into wolves. My mother and father had warned me that adolescent shifters had a hard time controlling their shifts, or their emotions. A dangerous combination. But I was used to danger.

When my nieces were just babies, I'd made a promise to Tari that if anything ever happened to her, I'd take care of the girls as if they were my own. I intended to keep that promise, and not just because I loved Tari. I loved Ember and Aurora with my whole heart. They deserved a better childhood than the one Tari and I were forced to endure—fraught with fear, deprivation, and strife. They deserved to grow up in a safe world free from prejudice, and I had every intention of giving it to them or I'd die trying.

* * *

After Ember and Aurora had fallen asleep, I laid on the hard feather pallet, blinking up at the textured white ceiling above us, firelight dancing across the rock's surface while the moon and stars twinkled just outside. Though I was starting to appreciate the beauty of this strange place, I'd be relieved once we reached my mates' home—if for no other reason than the girls and I needed a bath and a clean change of clothes.

I rolled onto my side, blinking at my mates when I heard them laughing around the campfire.

Blaze caught my eye and waved me forward. “Come sit with us a spell, Shirina.”

I cringed at that. Did I want to sit with them, with Draevyn? When Nikkos scooted over, patting a spot beside him, I felt as if I had no choice. I carefully extricated myself from the cape I was using as a blanket, doing my best not to disturb the girls, and I quickly padded over to them, the cool night air sending a chill skittering across my spine. I sat beside Nikkos, thanking him when he draped a warm wing over my shoulders.

The brothers were picking meat out of their teeth with the ends of thin bones while passing around a silver flask. I didn't want to think about what was in that flask. I frowned, pushing the flask away when Nikkos offered it.

"It will warm your bones," he said with a wink.

I pressed up against him. "You warm them enough."

If his smile was flame, he could've lit a thousand torches.

"Were their fathers killed in the Lupine attack?" Blaze asked.

"Yes," I answered, looking across the fire at Blaze while strategically avoiding staring at Draevyn who sat beside him. I didn't bother explaining to them that Tari's mates were possibly alive based on my father's speculation. I couldn't risk the girls finding out and getting their hopes up until I was absolutely sure.

"You're not being truthful."

I shot Draevyn a glare as firelight danced across his stoic features. "Excuse me?"

He gave me a long, dark look as if he was staring deep into my soul. "I can tell when someone's lying."

"Drae!" Blaze smacked his brother's head with the end of a bone.

"Oh, can you?" I snapped.

Draevyn slapped the bone out of his brother's hand with a snarl. "Yes."

Crossing my arms, I imagined my eyes were arrows, and I was shooting his smug face full of holes. “My parents weren’t lying when they said they didn’t kill your parents, yet you refused to believe them.”

He pointed an accusatory finger at me. “There were numerous witnesses the night they killed our parents.”

I stiffened at that. “It’s impossible for anyone to lie to me when I use my siren voice.”

“Maybe your magic isn’t as strong as you think.”

“Drae!” Nikkos snapped, throwing a bone at him. “Enough!”

Was that all my other mates were good for? Throwing bones? Rage boiled my blood. That prick! “Would you like to wager on that?”

Drae jumped up when Blaze tried to hit him again. “Sure,” he said with a sneer, his wings outstretched, “as soon as you tell me the truth about their fathers.”

I threw up my hands. “You’re a bastard. How’s that for truth?”

“A bastard would imply I was born without a father,” he said with a hiss, “and I had a father until *your* father killed him.”

I shrank back as if he’d slapped me, and as I looked into his rage-filled eyes, I swore I felt a fissure tearing through my heart. What had I ever done to make him hate me so?

Blaze stood, balling up his fists. “Drae, that’s enough.”

He snarled at his brother. “I’m only just getting started.”

Nikkos jumped to his feet, shaking a fist at his brother. “You can’t blame her for her father’s sins.”

“She’s as much his victim as we are,” Blaze added, his voice rising. “In case you’ve forgotten, he tried to steal her memories.”

Draevyn clutched his hair by the roots, a wild look in his eyes. “And yet she wouldn’t let us kill him.”

“He’s still my father!” Tears stung the backs of my eyes as I stumbled to my feet and began to pace. “I need to find a way out of this bond. I cannot mate with you.”

“You already said that today.”

My gaze snapped to his. “Just in case you weren’t listening the first time.”

“Oh, I was listening.” He waved me off with a sneer. “And go ahead and try to find a way out, because I’m not attracted to you.”

“Drae!” Blaze yelled, pushing his brother’s shoulder before hitting him with a burst of flame.

Draevyn swore and went to charge his brother.

I’d had enough. White hot rage flooded my veins. “On. Your. Knees!” I boomed, my siren voice shaking the walls.

All three brothers fell to their knees. I hadn’t meant to immobilize all of them, but at least they were no longer fighting.

Chest heaving, I stalked up to Draevyn. “Answer me truthfully.” My siren voice echoed as it rang through the tunnel. “Are you attracted to me?”

He blinked up at me. “Yes.”

“Then why are you cruel?”

“Because I’m angry.”

“So am I. What kind of a bitch would I be if I took out my anger on my nieces, two innocents who depend on me to keep them safe? But I don’t take it out on them, because this mess isn’t their fault, just like it’s not my fault your parents are dead.” I heaved a bone-weary sigh. I was so sick of this, arguing with the Fae who was supposed to defend and protect me. “Now maybe you will understand when I say people can’t lie to me when I use my siren voice.” I waved a dismissive hand at him. “Get up.” When he opened his mouth to speak, I added, my deep voice echoing across the cavern walls, “And don’t speak to me the rest of the night.”

He clamped his mouth shut.

I turned to his brothers. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to include you. I release you from this spell.”

They both stumbled to their feet, ruffling their wings. Luckily, I saw no censure in their eyes.

“It’s okay,” Nikkos said.

“We don’t fault you for our brother’s stupidity,” Blaze added.

I could only manage a half-smile. Thank the elements Blaze and Nikkos weren’t like Draevyn.

I turned my back on them at the sound of my nieces stirring. As I looked into their wide, glassy eyes, I cursed Draevyn for making me wake them. Then I cursed him again for the tears that silently fell down my face. I crawled beneath my cloak and hugged my nieces tight, burying my face in their hair, so my mates wouldn’t see me cry.

* * *

Draevyn Inferni

I flew as fast as I could out of everyone’s earshot, so I could scream to the heavens and release this raging inferno that was building inside me. After I landed on the top of the mountain, a long, flat plateau that disappeared into a line of moonlit clouds, I threw back my head with a roar and unleashed my flames, heedless of the sweat that dripped down my brow and back.

I’d been just seven when our parents died. Blaze had been only four, around the same size as Ember and Aurora. He barely remembered our parents. Nikkos had been just one, and he had no recollection of them at all.

Which meant that I carried the burden of keeping their memories alive, and now it seemed, I was the only brother who cared about avenging their deaths. I’d had their killers in my grasp, a flame’s throw away, and she’d made me stop. Hanging my head in my hands, I released a frustrated groan,

and for the first time since finding Shirina I doubted my own purpose, my own sanity.

What if she was right? What if people couldn't lie when she used her siren voice? I hadn't been able to deny my attraction to her. Of course she was beautiful. I wasn't blind. But she dragged the words from my mouth as if she'd taken possession of my very tongue. She'd done the same thing to her parents that night we'd found her.

They can't lie.

Holy elements, what if she was right? What if they didn't kill my parents? Then who did? And why would our own servants and guards lie to me?

I dragged my hands through my hair with a groan, knowing I'd probably need to apologize to Shirina soon. Then I lurched forward with a roar when fire lanced up my back and wings.

I spun around just as Blaze hit the ground in front of me, rage reflecting in his eyes. I knew his punch was coming, but I didn't block it as pain exploded inside my skull. Yeah, I could've slowed time enough to sidestep, but I probably deserved it.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Blaze pulled back his fist, shaking it with a hiss. If his hand hurt as much as my eye did, it would be swollen come morning.

I instinctively covered my eye. "I knew you'd take her side!"

It was the wrong thing to say. I sounded like a petulant child. It was as if that seven-year-old boy had resurfaced, all the pain and confusion from that night washing over me like a tidal wave. I'd woken to flames outside my window and found my parents' lifeless bodies on the floor, blood pooling around their heads. My brothers had almost died in that same fire. Their nursery in a separate part of the castle from mine had gone up in flames. Hadn't it been for the sacrifices of a few brave servants, I would've lost my brothers, too.

Then our queen had come, and she held me while I cried in her arms. She'd taken care of everything, from finding my baby brother a nursemaid to hiring a steward to maintain the estate until I'd come of age. But most importantly, she'd held me many, many nights, letting me cry out my sorrows while singing me to sleep. She'd been more than my queen, she'd been my surrogate mother. And now I was supposed to accept that the story Malvolia had told me about my parents' death was wrong?

Blaze's feathers stood on end as he paced in front of me. "She's our mate, Drae! I swear, I don't even know you right now."

Nikkos landed beside Blaze, kicking up dust and rocks as he looked at me with murder in his eyes. "Did you want to tell her you were attracted to her?"

I looked away from their penetrating glares. "No."

Blaze let out a string of curses. "She forced you to tell the truth."

I worked hard to unclench my jaw as reality settled over me like an icy bucket of water. "Yes."

Nikkos's eyes widened, then narrowed. "Her parents didn't kill our parents."

No. They had to have been the killers, because if not, then our queen was lying. Our queen. How I'd adored her all these years. Had her motherly affection for me been nothing but smoke and flame?

I clutched my chest, which ached as if it had been split open by an axe. "There were witnesses."

Blaze folded his arms, giving me a look that bordered on a mixture of pity and disgust. "They either lied or else they were tricked."

"How?" I shook my head. None of this made any sense. "They saw Flora and Derrick slit our parents' throats."

Blaze jutted a foot forward. "Who saw?"

“The servants.” I tossed my hands in the air. “The guards. Malvolia’s mages.”

Nikkos rubbed his chin. “And they just stood by while it happened?”

I shrugged, realizing their story didn’t make sense.

“What if they were too afraid to tell the truth?” Blaze asked.

Smoke poured from my fingers as I glared at my treasonous brother. “Are you suggesting our queen’s mages did it?”

“I don’t know who did it.” Blaze’s gaze shot to my fingers as he took a step back from me. “But if Shirina says nobody can lie when she uses her siren voice, then I believe her.”

“Which makes you an even bigger asshole for treating her so badly,” Nikkos spat.

I swallowed at the censure coming from my youngest brother. In all my years, I never recalled Nikkos being cross with me. “She lied about the girls’ fathers.” My voice faltered as the words sounded flat even to my own ears. It was the only defense I had, and I realized more and more I was a fool.

Blaze gaped at me as if I’d sprouted horns and a tail. “Are you just looking for excuses to hate her?”

I backed up when both brothers advanced on me, their feathers standing on end. “No.”

“You’re really fucking up, Drae, and believe me, you might not care now, but one day you’re going to regret it.” The disgust reflecting in Nikkos’s eyes brought me to a new level of low. “We could live five hundred years, fight in dozens of wars, serve many other queens, but we will only have *one* fated mate.”

Elements, he was right. One fated mate. I’d never find another Shirina.

“Listen to my words very carefully,” Blaze spoke through a hiss, his words searing the air between us. “If you so much

as look at her the wrong way again, I'll pummel you so hard,
you won't be able to fly for weeks."

Chapter Seven

Shirina

I woke with a heavy heart and an aching soul, not to mention sore bones. I never thought I could sleep in a more uncomfortable bed than that cramped loft space at our cottage. I was wrong. I slowly sat, hugging my knees to my chest, watching the morning sun's pink ribbons cut through billowing clouds and stretch across the horizon. My nieces stirred beside me. They looked like sleeping angels with their little hands tucked beneath their cherubic cheeks. I wasn't fooled. I clutched my sore gut, recalling the many times they'd kneed me last night while tossing and turning.

I turned my gaze to the sunrise once more, at the two distinct shadows that approached us, their long wings stretched out while they soared on pockets of air. As Nikkos and Blaze drew near, their smiles wide and their eyes bright, I smiled back. I was so thankful for my two mates. If only their brother had a sliver of their kindness.

Nikkos was first to land, gliding to a stop and landing with the grace of a swan. "Good morning," he said to me. "How was your sleep?"

I dragged a hand down my face. "Rough. Yours?"

"Rough." He grimaced as his brother landed beside him. "We'll sleep better when we get home."

Home. Abyssus, where Draevyn was lord of the manor. I had a feeling I'd be even less comfortable there than I was here.

I shrugged, then looked away. "Hope so." I rubbed Aurora's back when she stiffened and let out a little moan. I leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Wake up, sweetheart. It's just a bad dream."

The girls sometimes had night terrors about either the bad king, the evil queen, or the angry bear. Aurora relaxed beneath my touch, going boneless while I continued to rub her back.

“Just so you know, Drae has a black eye to go with his busted nose.”

I looked up at Blaze as he cracked his knuckles. He'd punched his brother again? I didn't know if I should thank him or scold him. “Is that supposed to make me happy?”

Tension lines crinkled his mouth and eyes. “I think he finally understands he's been a prick.”

I shook my head. “He shouldn't need you to beat him up to realize that.”

The brothers shared a dark look before Blaze answered solemnly. “We know.”

I gently caressed Aurora's spine while I swallowed back the rising tide of emotion that threatened to overwhelm me. “But thank you for defending me.”

“Of course. Always.” Blaze splayed a hand across his heart, his eyes shining with sincerity. “You're our mate.”

These mages were making it too easy to love them. And yet they served the queen who I'd been taught my entire life to fear. By that reasoning, I should have feared them, too, but I longed to be held in their arms. I'd never had such conflicted feelings in my entire life.

“There's a pretty little lake nearby,” Nikkos said. “We caught some fish and started a fire. Want us to take you there?”

I nodded, then rubbed Ember's back as she started to stir. “I would love that.” I looked at Nikkos and Blaze, realizing how very lucky I was to have them. “Thanks.”

* * *

Flying in Nikkos's arms was the closest thing I'd ever felt to heaven, and as the clouds, painted in hues of pink and yellow, parted for us, I thought perhaps he'd taken me there. I welcomed the icy breeze that blew back my hair and cooled my heated skin as I rested my head on his shoulder. My hand splayed across his solid chest, his skin warming my fingertips, as his wings flapped slower and slower still. When he soared

in circles above the clouds, I realized he was delaying the landing. Was he trying to savor this moment together, too? I took a chance and looked into his golden eyes and had my answer.

His smile was pure, radiant sunshine. And for the briefest moment, there was just Nikkos and me, all other sights and sounds muted compared to the golden flecks in his eyes. I didn't think there could be any better place in all the world or the heavens than right here in my fire mage's arms.

My nieces squealed from somewhere behind us, breaking my trance and turning my veins to ice. "Are they alright?" I asked, looking over his shoulder, panicking when I saw nothing but endless wispy clouds.

He slanted a smile. "They're fine."

"Take me to them," I pleaded.

"Of course." He let out a sharp whistle before diving through the clouds.

I held my breath, cool air turning my hair into whips that lashed my face as we descended at an alarming rate.

We broke through the clouds, Blaze following behind us, carrying my two beaming nieces, and my heartrate slowed to nearly normal.

Nikkos's wings snapped open, and we glided toward the ground like a flower petal floating through the air until he gracefully landed. He gently set me down, steadying me with a hand on my arm while helping me stand on firm ground, quite opposite Draevyn's rough dismount.

I thanked him with a smile, while still clinging to his arms. I could tell by the gleam in his eyes he was hoping for something more than a smile. I bit my lip, heat flushing my cheeks when I thought about kissing his full lips.

But then Aurora and Ember were tugging on my skirts.

"Isn't it beautiful here, Auntie?" Aurora asked me, awe ringing in her words.

I wiped a smudge of dirt from her nose. “It’s breathtaking.”

The lake was indeed beautiful. It was nestled on top of the mountain, a large, inky pool that had barely a ripple, mist rising off the surface and wispy clouds traveling across it like a slow-moving herd of sheep. The earth surrounding the water was as black as midnight with iridescent grains reflecting the misty morning sunlight. Several small copses of trees were scattered around the lake, as if their creation had been an afterthought. Or maybe the elements had been too tired to finish.

And standing beside a campfire on the sandy soil was none other than Draevyn with that swollen nose and now a blackened eye. I felt his gaze on me like the heat from a thousand sun flares, shocked when he offered me a slight smile. “Hey.”

Was Draevyn talking to me?

I looked at Nikkos who offered me a reassuring smile. When I turned back toward Draevyn, he still looked at me expectantly.

“Hey,” I said, my voice lacking inflection.

He wiped his hands down his pants, nodding toward the skewered fish roasting over the fire. “The fish will be ready in a few minutes.”

“Okay.” I shrugged, not knowing what else to say.

My feet felt frozen in place as he walked up to me. “Is it okay if we talk?”

I wrapped my arms around myself and instinctively pressed against Nikkos. “I don’t feel like talking.” And why would I want to talk to him after everything he’d said and done?

“It won’t take long.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, his wings drooping. “Promise.”

I was painfully aware of Nikkos and Blaze not making a sound as they stood beside me. Even the girls had gone quiet.

For their sake, I'd hear him out.

I heaved out a long breath. "Fine." I gave him an expectant look. "What?"

He motioned toward the trees behind us. "Will you walk with me, so we can have a little privacy?"

Regrettably, I pulled away from Nikkos, instantly missing the feel of his warm skin against mine. I repressed a shiver without Nikkos's body heat to warm me. I had no idea what force of nature compelled me to go with Draevyn. He kept pace beside me, his hands behind his back, the tips of his black feathers tickling my arm. I looked over my shoulder at Nikkos and Blaze, their hard stares boring holes through the back of Draevyn's head while the girls pressed their hands to their hearts, staring after me as if I was walking into my own grave.

He stopped behind a narrow tree, barely big enough to conceal him. "I wanted to apologize for my behavior," he said. "I realize now your parents might not have killed my parents."

My jaw dropped. "Might not?"

"Th-they didn't," he sputtered. "Your siren voice is too strong."

I glared up at him while pulling my cape tightly around me. "So this means you won't try to kill them?"

His shoulders fell. "I won't, and I hope you can forgive me for everything."

Everything? Like the cruel words he'd said to me that first night when I was already devastated after escaping my parents? Or how he'd threatened to drop me when we were high above the clouds?

"To be honest," I said. "I don't know if I can." His features fell, but before he could speak, I added. "And what about my sister?"

"W-what?" he stammered.

"What will you do if Malvolia calls on you to kill her?" Jutting my hands on my hips, I glared at him, waiting. "Well?"

I asked, not bothering to mask the derision in my voice when he gaped at me, his mouth open like a fish out of water.

“Hopefully my queen won’t call on me to kill your sister, but I can’t lie to you, Shirina.” He splayed a hand across his chest. “I must protect my queen.”

And there it was. His confession was like poison leaching into my veins. My fated mate would rather break my heart than risk angering an evil queen.

“My sister never wanted to kill your queen,” I spat. “The only ruler she wanted to kill was Fachnan for what he did to Lupine.”

“But the prophecy said—”

I jabbed his chest, my anger flaring like a thousand burning suns. “Who was this prophet?” I was so sick and tired of hearing about this damn prophecy. Our parents had drilled it into our heads since we were children—one day one of us would become a powerful white witch and kill Queen Malvolia. Bollocks. My sister didn’t have a murderous bone in her body.

“I don’t know.” He backed up, holding out his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Flora and her mates killed her when we were children.”

“First off, my parents might be stupid, but they aren’t killers. You can’t seem to get that through your thick head.” I jabbed him again and again, not caring when he winced and backed away. “Second, my mother has only one mate, my father.”

He sidestepped me, his features falling. “And your other father.”

The rage that heated my veins was a living, palpable thing. “I didn’t have another father!”

“You did.” He scratched the back of his head, his brows scrunched in confusion. “His name was Marius.”

“Marius?” I’d never heard of that name before. Certainly, my parents would’ve told me if I had another father.

He stopped, staring at me as if he was seeing a ghost. “Your parents didn’t tell you about him?”

I threw up my hands, sorely tempted to give him another black eye. “Is this some kind of cruel joke?”

He vehemently shook his head. “Why would I joke about this?”

I gaped at my tormenter, waiting for his shell to crack, ready to pummel him for teasing me.

“Everything okay, you two?” Blaze said as he came up to me.

I spun on him with a snarl. “No, it’s not. Did you know about Marius?”

He blinked at me. “Derrick’s brother?”

The world slid out from beneath my feet, and I was falling, falling... “What happened to him?” I rasped, emotion threatening to cut off my words. I had another father?

Blaze frowned. “He was killed in battle.”

My world tipped and spun. *No. No. No.* I shook a fist at my tormentors. “You mean Malvolia killed him!”

Blaze slowly backed away, as if I was a voracious dragon ready to snap off his head. “Her mages killed him when he was fleeing to Windhaven.”

“Fleeing to Windhaven?” I clutched my throat. “So he was hunted down and slaughtered like a wild animal?”

“He *was* wild,” Draevyn interrupted. “He’d already killed dozens of noblemen and women, anyone who refused to help him overthrow Malvolia.”

Magic pulsed through my veins. “And you believe that?”

He shrugged, then averted his gaze. “Just because your parents didn’t kill our parents, didn’t mean they weren’t incapable of killing all the others.”

“Listen to me carefully.” I enunciated each word with clipped precision. “My parents are *not* murderers—”

“They’re not innocents, Shirina,” Draevyn interrupted, his voice taking on a hard edge. “Look at the horrible things they’ve already done to you and your sister.”

“Excuse me,” I said, jarring Draevyn’s arm and wing while I stormed past him and marched back toward the lake.

“Where are you going?” Draevyn called at my back.

“Away from you,” I answered. I stormed past the campfire and then slipped off my shoes as I walked along the shore, my toes sinking into the cool black sand, grounding me to something, anything to keep my soul from falling into the abyss. How I wished this shoreline would open up and swallow me whole.

At the sound of feet pattering behind me, I stopped and unclenched my fists, smiling to myself when they slipped their hands in mine. My little shadows. What would my heart do without them?

I heaved a shuddering breath while tears silently fell down my face. These poor children had already suffered so much loss in their four years. I would be strong for them. They deserved nothing less. We silently stared at the pristine lake, the air so thin here, I was forced to take deeper breaths.

Marius. My father. Ember and Aurora’s other pappo.

Why had my parents never told us?

For my mates’ sake, they’d better hope I never came across the mages who’d killed him, for I would find a way to avenge my father’s death.

* * *

We ate breakfast in stony silence. I barely picked at my food, too sickened by the news of Marius. Though I felt Draevyn’s gaze upon me, I refused to look in his direction or acknowledge him when he offered me more food. I schooled my features into a mask of stone when he finally threw down his plate and flew away, the heavy wind from his wings beating down on my back.

I cringed when his brothers swore at him.

“They say a lot of bad words,” Ember whispered to me.

“Cover your ears,” I said to the girls, then gave my mates a stern look.

Their cheeks colored, and they both apologized.

I nodded curtly and took the girls to the shore. Wrapping my arms around myself, I shivered beneath my thin cloak while the girls skipped rocks into the lake. They each wore Nikkos’s and Blaze’s long tunics over their nightgowns for extra warmth, though they still had nothing to cover their feet but hole-filled stockings.

“Mindful you don’t get your stockings wet this time,” I warned.

Aurora looked over her shoulder, then scanned the skies. “We won’t, Auntie,” she said, frowning. “We don’t want *him* to get mad at us again.”

Ember nodded her agreement, her eyes wide as she also searched the skies.

How sad that my nieces were so terrified of Draevyn. How could I possibly mate with someone like him?

I picked up a flat, smooth stone, skipping it across the dark water, watching as the ripples fanned out toward the shore. The girls squealed when it disappeared into the low fog that covered the other side of the lake.

“Hey, you okay?” Nikkos said at my back.

I looked over my shoulder at him and Blaze as they stood with their wings tucked behind their backs, their brows creased with worry.

Shrugging, I threw another stone, this one missing its mark and plopping almost immediately. “I will be.”

Blaze stepped closer to me. “I’m sorry you had to find out about Marius like that,” he whispered.

“Me, too,” I murmured.

His breath tickled the nape of my neck, turning my bones to jelly. His warmth radiated onto me like sunlight piercing

stormy skies, and I fought the urge to lean into him and let him wrap his strong arms around me.

Ember let out a squeal, breaking my trance. My gaze shot to my nieces, who weren't paying attention to us as they searched for the best stones. Ember held up her prize, a flat, black stone with iridescent markings.

"Help me find one, too," Aurora begged.

Ember handed her sister her stone. "You can have mine, sissy. I'll find more."

Aurora thanked her with a kiss on the cheek. Hand in hand, they searched the rocky shore for more. These girls were the very best of friends, just like Tari and I had been while growing up. I wondered what had gone so terribly wrong with my mother and Malvolia.

"Why would your parents keep Marius from you?"

I looked over my shoulder at Blaze. "You expect me to understand their reasoning?"

"No." He frowned. "I'm sorry."

"Did Drae apologize?" Nikkos asked.

"Sort of." I turned my gaze to the girls, waving them back when they strayed too close to the water. "Then he said he'd still kill my sister."

They both let out a string of curses. Thankfully, my nieces were out of earshot.

Eyeing my mates, I released a slow breath. This was my chance to know if I could trust them. If I wanted to join my heart and soul to them forever. "So you wouldn't kill her if Malvolia asked you?" I looked deeply into their eyes, watching for any sign of deception. Yes, I could use my siren voice, but I knew they'd resent me if I forced it out of them.

"No," Nikkos said, his eyes shining with sincerity. "Because I know it would cause you pain."

I exhaled a relieved breath before turning to his brother. "What about you, Blaze?"

“I understand why you think our queen is evil,” he said, “but we know Malvolia. She won’t force us to choose between loyalty to you or her.”

I inwardly cringed. This wasn’t the answer I was hoping for. I held his gaze a long moment. “Which means?”

“Which means if you don’t want us to kill your sister, we won’t.” He bridged the distance between us, taking my hand in his.

His warm, calloused hand on mine sent a zing straight to my heart. I jerked away from him as if his hand was on fire. Was he trying to distract me with his tempting touch? “But what if she does force you to choose?”

“I don’t want to be branded a traitor, but in the rare chance she forces me to choose, I will pick my mate.” Claspng his hand over his heart, he bowed slightly, his dark eyes peering at me from beneath his thick lashes. “I will *always* pick my mate. I’m not a fool. I know not every Fae is gifted with a fated mate. I’m not about to ruin this chance we have with you.”

Our gazes locked, and I feared my heart would beat right out of my chest. Whereas Draevyn’s tongue was poison and thorns, Blaze’s was warm, honeyed wine, and I fought the urge to throw myself into his arms and drink him in.

“We’re sorry about Drae,” Blaze added. “He had no right to treat you that way.”

I snapped out of my trance. “Are you, though?” It was wrong of me to say. I knew it the moment the words slipped off my tongue. Why was I lashing out at Blaze? My behavior made me no better than Draevyn.

He held up his hands in a defensive gesture. “I beat him twice, didn’t I?”

“Shirina, we’ll straighten him out.” Nikkos splayed a hand across his heart. “Promise.”

I made the mistake of looking into Nikkos’s big, golden eyes, at the slightest hint of a smile tugging on those full, sensual lips. I swore his smile held the direct key to my heart.

“No, it’s fine. I’m sorry I took it out on you,” I said to Blaze. My shoulders caved inward with the admission. “He brings out the worst in me.”

“It’s not fine.” Blaze grasped my shoulder, his eyes searching mine. “You have every right to be upset.”

Even through the fabric, I could feel his touch branding me, his warm fingers searing into my chilled skin. If only their brother wasn’t a monster. “You think so?” I asked. “After he threatened to drop me yesterday?”

Solar flares flashed in Blaze’s eyes, and his rage pulsed between us like a tangible thing. “What?”

“He didn’t mean it,” I said, realizing I’d told them too much. As much as I despised Draevyn, I didn’t want the brothers fighting over me again. “But it was still an unkind thing to say.”

“Don’t worry.” Blaze’s top lip curled back in a snarl that reminded me of a dragon preparing to unleash his fire. “I’ll take care of him.”

I swallowed back my fear. What would he do? “I don’t want you fighting because of me. I’ll get over it.”

He and Nikkos shared a look.

Blaze dragged a hand down his face. “We should get going. We have a long flight.”

I motioned to the girls. “We’re ready.” It’s not like we had anything to pack.

Nikkos took the girls in his arms. They squealed and pounded his shoulders. “Hurry, let’s beat your brother!”

Nikkos shot into the sky, his wings propelling him like streaming arrows.

I clutched my throat as I watched smoke trailing him like cannon fodder. I looked to Blaze, unnerved by the smoke and flame reflecting in his eyes, too.

I went to him when he held his arms out to me. He picked me up as if I weighed no more than a bag of feathers. I

wrapped my arms around his neck, the warmth from his skin seeping into mine. He smelled delicious, his own sulfuric blend with a woody, feral undertone. I fought the urge to drag my fingers through his thick mop of hair and fill my lungs with his scent.

“Let’s go teach my brother a lesson,” he said with a wink, flashing a predatory smile. Somehow, I didn’t think he was speaking about Nikkos.

What had I done?

* * *

Blaze Inferni

I was so angry with my brother, my vision clouded red. Not even holding sweet Shirina in my arms as we soared through the clouds could assuage my rage.

We followed our brother’s scent toward the direction of the ledge where we’d slept yesternight. Well, they’d slept. I’d spent most of the night tossing and turning on the hard ground while my worries plagued me. We couldn’t keep Shirina and the children secluded at Abyssus forever. Malvolia would call on us to answer for our disappearance, to explain to her why we failed to kill Derrick and Flora.

Then what?

We had to convince Shirina to join our queen’s side before that happened. And now my elements’ cursed brother just made that task even harder by telling her about Marius. Why hadn’t her parents told her about her other father, and what other secrets did they hide? Perhaps their deception would work in our favor, making it easier for us to turn her against them. I feared what would happen if she refused to bow to our queen. Nikkos and I would fight to the death to defend our mate. Would we have to fight against our fellow mages? Against Draevyn?

Speaking of the son of a siren, I spotted him the moment we broke through the clouds.

Nikkos and I dropped Shirina and the girls at the far end of the ledge. “Stay here,” I said to Shirina. “We’ll be right back.”

“Please don’t fight,” she pleaded, wringing her hands together while batting long lashes.

I was sorely tempted to give in to my beautiful mate, for something about the sparkle in her warm amber eyes compelled me to obey. But, no. Her honor must be avenged, not to mention, I would not tolerate threats to her safety. But even as I turned toward Drae’s figure, not much bigger than a speck of dust standing at the other end of the ledge, I felt compelled to turn back to Shirina and obey her wishes. She was a rare witch, a miraculous flower blooming among the ashes of war, which was why I had to fight Draevyn. I would not let him ruin my chance at bonding with her. I fought the urge to take her in my arms and kiss her senseless, but not until she was ready, and not while this rage was pumping through my veins. I suddenly realized her siren magic was controlling me. I shook my head to clear it of the fog that crept into my brain like tendrils of smoke luring me into her trance.

I looked over at Nikkos. He was staring at her with glazed eyes, his jaw slackened, drool hanging off his lip. Damn, she was good.

I latched on to Nikkos’s arm, dragging him with me. “Wake up, brother,” I growled in his ear.

He snapped his head toward me, looking at me as the haze cleared from his eyes.

I jerked him off the ledge and we shot back into the air, my gaze narrowing as I focused on our fool brother below.

We dropped in front of him, and I didn’t give him time to defend himself as I punched him in his nose again, the audible *crack* ricocheting through the air.

“Ouch! Bastard!” Clutching his nose, he stumbled back. “What was that for?”

“You threatened to drop her, you son of a siren!” I hollered, flames sprouting from my hands.

Blood pooled around his hand as he held his nose. “She told you?”

“Why wouldn’t she?” Nikkos asked him.

His eyes lit up like a thunderous sky. “I didn’t mean it, and she knew it!”

I shook my head, disgusted by his response. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Drae?”

“She’s our mate, Drae.” Nikkos stepped up to our brother until they were nearly toe-to-toe in a surprising show of defiance. “Most Fae can go an entire lifetime without meeting their fated mates, and we found her, a beautiful and powerful witch.”

“And you’re such an elements’ cursed fool that you’re willing to throw it all away,” I hissed.

Drae backed away from us. “I tried to apologize!”

Nikkos shook his head, pain flashing in his eyes. “For years I looked up to you, Drae. I thought you were the smartest Fae alive, but I don’t even recognize you anymore.”

My jaw dropped as I gaped at my brothers. Nikkos rarely stood up to Drae. Ever since I could remember, our youngest brother had practically worshipped him.

“You know what?” Drae flung a burst of flame at us, but it fizzled like a falling comet before landing at our feet. “Fuck off! I’m leaving.”

“Where are you going?” I demanded.

He turned his back on us, shoving supplies into his pack. “Away from all of you.”

Nikkos let out a snort of derision. “So you’re going to leave us to carry Shirina and the girls by ourselves?”

He motioned to Shirina and the girls as they walked along the hollowed-out ledge, drawing closer to us. “They don’t want me to carry them anyway.”

I flung a ball of flame at him. “You prick!”

He ducked way too fast, and I knew he’d manipulated time to do it. Whereas I had supernatural speed, he had the ability to slow down time. Bastard. Then he threw his own flame back at me. I barely ducked in time as the flame went soaring

over my head, singing the tips of my feathers. He was damn lucky it fizzled before reaching Shirina and the girls.

“Let him go,” Nikkos said, spitting at Drae’s feet. “We don’t need him.”

“Don’t you dare go looking for her parents or her sister,” I warned, smoke pouring from my fingertips. “She’ll never forgive you if you kill them, and neither will we.”

He finished packing his bag and shoved a wing and an arm into the wide strap before cinching it on his back. “I’m not looking for anyone. I’m going home.”

Chapter Eight

Shirina

I nervously paced the hollowed-out ledge while watching Blaze and Nikkos fly toward us. My heart plummeted when Draevyn flew away, disappearing into the clouds.

Blaze gently touched down on the ledge, his beating wings blowing back my hair. “You girls ready?”

The girls jumped up and down, squealing.

“Yes.” I wrung my hands together, squinting into the sun. Draevyn was gone. “Where did he go?”

Nikkos shrugged. “He went on ahead of us.”

I gaped at him. “He left us?”

Blaze’s eyes sharpened to twin blade points. “We’re better off without him.”

I nervously chewed my lip. “You can carry all of us that far?”

“Of course,” Nikkos said with a smile, his enthusiasm sounding forced. “I was wondering if we could borrow your cape and turn it into a sling for the girls.”

“Anything you need,” I said as I unlatched my cape. I held the thick fabric in my hands. It was my only nice possession, weaved by the satyrs, a gift from my father shortly after we’d lost Tari. It should hold their weight, shouldn’t it? I worried my lip, my gaze darting to the girls as they bounced around like they were trying to pop bubbles beneath their feet. They were far too rambunctious. How would only one Ravini manage both of them? “But I don’t want them to fall out.”

“We won’t let anything happen to them. Promise.” Nikkos winked as he took the cape from me, his smile making those dimples in his cheeks more pronounced.

Oh, how my heart fluttered whenever he smiled. I could easily lose myself in his arms, and I felt a distinct pull toward him, as if our hearts were attached by an invisible rope. I

hadn't felt such a strong connection to him since that night we'd first met. I swallowed back my desire. Now was not the time to become entranced by my mate. "So who will carry me?"

Nikkos pulled out a dull bronze coin. "We're taking turns. Whoever wins the toss gets Shirina first." He looked to his brother. "Call it, Blaze. Feathers or fire."

Blaze cut his gaze to me, and there was no mistaking the desire in his eyes. My spine turned to porridge and my knees involuntarily trembled. I feared I'd melt completely if I was left alone in Blaze's arms.

"Fire," he said, giving me a smoldering look.

Nikkos threw the coin into the air and caught it, slapping it on his forearm. His eyes lit up like fire bursts. "Feathers."

I admired the coin displaying a winged mage stamped into the metal.

I thought I heard Blaze mutter 'damn' under his breath, but he quickly righted his frown when the girls squealed and grabbed his legs.

Nikkos helped Blaze secure the cloak, tying it tightly around his shoulders and fashioning a hammock against his chest. He then tucked the girls inside, their legs tangled together while they faced each other.

"Your legs are squishing my legs." Aurora pouted, kicking her sister.

Ember cried out and smacked Aurora with her straw doll.

"No fighting," I scolded.

Ember rubbed her leg. "Can I fly on your back instead?" she asked Blaze.

"No!" I protested, accidentally unleashing my siren voice. I slapped my hand over my mouth, stroking Ember's face when she blinked up at me with frightened eyes. "I'm sorry, baby. It's not safe to fly on his back."

She frowned, hanging her head. "Okay, Auntie."

“Thank you for carrying them,” I said to Blaze.

“No need to thank me.” He cradled them with both hands. “They make good company.”

“Really?” Nervous laughter bubbled up from my throat. “Even when they bombard you with questions?”

“Even then.”

The smoldering look he gave me made my heart do backflips, and for a moment, I wished that I was the one tied up against Blaze.

“Go easy on him.” I stroked the girls’ cherubic little cheeks. “And please no squirming. He needs to focus on flying, not making sure you don’t fall.”

“Yes, Auntie,” they said.

Nikkos checked their sling once more, tightening the knots securing it around Blaze’s shoulders.

Aurora wiggled like a moth trying to escape its cocoon. “I’m squished.”

“I’m sorry, baby,” I said to her. “Only a few more days, and then we get to go to their big house where you’ll have lots of room to stretch your legs and play.”

“Is it bigger than Pappo and Yaya’s house?” Ember asked while hugging her doll to her chest.

“Oh, much bigger,” Nikkos said, “and much nicer.”

Ember gave him her prettiest smile before sucking on her thumb.

I nervously fidgeted with their hair, smoothing it behind their ears. “Now remember to do what Uncle Blaze says and let him know if you feel like you’re slipping.”

“Uncle Blaze?” Aurora squinted up at him. “Are you our uncle?”

Blaze’s jaw dropped and he looked at me as if I carried the moon and all the stars in my eyes.

“He’s my mate,” I said, my cheeks flushing, “so, yes, that makes him your uncle.”

“Is Nikkos our uncle, too?” Ember asked me.

“He is,” I said.

“What about Draevyn?” Aurora asked.

“No,” I grumbled, refusing to look at my mates. “Not him.” I gave each of the girls a kiss and double-checked the knots on the sling for good measure. I was keenly aware of Blaze’s heat radiating all over me, his feral scent clinging to my skin, and his dark eyes piercing my soul as they followed my every move. “Remember to be good,” I whispered to the girls.

“Yes, Auntie,” they answered, tucked tightly in their sling like little birds in a nest.

“Don’t I get a kiss?”

Heat crept into my cheeks as I looked at Blaze, his feral gaze nearly taking my breath away. “Maybe later.”

He splayed a hand across his heart. “I shall be looking forward to ‘later’ with anticipation.”

Nikkos held open his arms, bowing like a perfect gentleman, those dimples in his cheeks deepening. “Your chariot awaits, my lady.”

“Thank you.” I bit my lip, letting him lift me into his arms. As he shot into the sky, clutching me tightly, I knew I could be content to live several lifetimes with my two mates. Yet, a blade twisted in my heart at the thought of Draevyn’s rejection.

He’d left us, and for that I didn’t think I could ever forgive him.

* * *

Despite the frigid air that blew back my hair, I was nice and warm tucked in Nikkos’s arms. We’d only flown for a few hours, the sun midway up the sky. We’d already had to stop twice, once because Aurora had to tinkle and another because

Ember was too squished. I feared our flight would take longer without Draevyn helping us. Curse him.

Blaze flew beside us, my nieces whining and fussing in his arms despite my admonitions. Blaze tried to assuage them, but I could tell their constant bickering was wearing him down. Finally, my mates agreed to stop for a repast. They landed beside a pretty stream that I feared was too tempting for the girls to resist. This time I took off their stockings and let them splash in the ankle-deep water.

Mindful of the spiky thorns, Nikkos, Blaze, and I picked plump berries from thick brambles alongside the stream. The air was fragrant with their sweet smell, making them too hard to resist. The tips of our fingers turned purple as we ate while picking, though I saved a pile in my pocket for the girls.

I hummed a tune while working, reminded of the many times my mother, sister, and I had gone picking berries. Our mother would boil the berries after we filled our baskets. How we loved when she made jam and syrup to warm our oatcakes. Our mother always sang to us to make the work more tolerable. Always. Her voice was so lilting, so pretty. I recalled one song in particular that brought a smile to my face, so I sang it while pocketing berries.

'Feathers for her nest

Warm flames for her heart

Strong arms for her rest

Raven and maiden never shall part.'

"That's a pretty song," Blaze said before shoveling berries into his mouth. He still wore the girls' sling around his chest, Ember's straw doll nestled inside. What a good uncle he was.

"Thank you." I dropped a handful of berries into my pocket while also keeping one eye on the girls. "My mother used to sing it."

I cringed when both of my mates went silent. Did they still believe my parents killed their parents? My heart felt as heavy as a thundercloud, and my soul was too weary to try to convince them otherwise.

“Tell me about yourselves,” I asked, deciding to shift the topic.

“What do you want to know?” Nikkos asked.

“Who raised you?” I wanted to add ‘after your parents died’ but thought better of it.

Nikkos and Blaze shared a look. “Mostly servants...and Drae.”

“Your brother?” I gaped at them. “How old was he?”

“Seven,” Blaze answered.

I cringed at that. “He was too young to have such responsibilities.”

“I know, but he was the new lord of the manor,” Nikkos said. “I’m not trying to make excuses for his behavior, but he’s had a difficult life. He didn’t really have a childhood. It’s made him a little rough.”

I snorted at that. “A little rough?”

“Yeah...” He trailed off.

I refrained from rolling my eyes, though it was very difficult. I called back the girls when they wandered too far down the stream. They splashed their way back to me, their dresses soaked. I heaved a groan.

Blaze lifted them out of the water, and they squealed and kicked beneath his arms, giggling when he set them down and tickled them with the tips of his wings. Then he went to work drying off their dresses with his pale fire.

“Be good for Uncle Blaze,” I said to them, “and I’ll give you some sweet berries when you’re dry.”

“Yes, Auntie,” they answered.

I turned back to Nikkos, speaking in a hushed whisper while plucking more berries from their branches. “And because he had such a difficult childhood, you feel obligated to put up with his moods now.” It was more of a statement than a question.

His cheeks colored. “Something like that.”

“Tari and I had rough childhoods.” I didn’t voice it aloud, but our childhood had been nightmarish at times. We’d been forced to move from shack to shack, always fearing for our lives, sometimes living off nothing but stale porridge while hiding in the shadows of the dark forest. I cleared my throat, glaring at Nikkos. “His past is no excuse.”

He frowned. “I know.”

My mood now soured, I bent over the stream, trying to wash the purple ink from my hands, a futile task without soap.

“Did you mean it when you said you might kiss Blaze later?”

I glanced sideways at Nikkos as he bent down beside me. “I don’t know.” Heat flooded my chest and face at the thought of Blaze’s lips on mine. “Maybe.”

“Would I be able to get a kiss, too?”

I stood, making the mistake of looking into Nikkos’s golden eyes, my gaze drawn lower to his plump, kissable lips. “Maybe.” Wildfire raced through my veins as I looked over his shoulder at Blaze and the girls. They were too engrossed in telling him a fairytale about a winged horse and a fairy princess to pay us any heed. I looked up at Nikkos, the desire swirling in his eyes catching me off guard and making all moisture evaporate from my mouth.

Finally, I cleared my throat. “I like you and Blaze...a lot.” I licked my lips, swallowing back my nerves. “But I don’t want to bond with Draevyn.”

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, a simple gesture that caused a trill to race across my skin and down my spine as he hovered over me.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, Shirina.”

I heaved a shaky sigh while trying not to fall under his spell. “Thank you for understanding.”

“You don’t need to thank me.” Thunderclouds brewed in his eyes. “My brother is a first-rate troll’s ass. I’m sorry for the way he treated you.”

“Me, too.” I chewed on my bottom lip. “After the girls fall asleep,” I blurted before I lost my nerve.

His eyes bulged. “What?”

Unable to hold his piercing gaze for long, I twisted the hem of my belt. “That’s when I’ll kiss you.”

“Oh!” His smile was so wicked, I wouldn’t have been surprised if devil horns sprouted from the top of his head. “I can put sleeping herbs in their food.”

Scowling, I shook my head. “You’re not drugging my nieces for a kiss.”

“I wouldn’t.” He let out a nervous-sounding burst of laughter. “I was just joking.”

“I know you were.” I forced a smile, though my stomach was churning. I was going to kiss them. I wondered if those kisses would lead to something more. Was I ready?

When he stepped even closer to me, his breath tickling my nape and turning my legs to limp noodles, I had my answer.

Yes, goddess, yes. “I really do like you a lot.”

I didn’t protest when he took me in his arms, nuzzling my brow with his smooth cheek. “Good,” he whispered hot and heavy in my ear. “Because now that I’ve found you, I’m never letting you go.”

“Oh,” I clung to him, digging my nails into his shoulders, wishing I could surrender to him this very moment.

A tug on my gown, and I looked down at Ember and Aurora, blinking up at me with those wide silvery-blue eyes, reminding me of baby birds chirping for food.

“We’ll take those berries now,” Aurora said.

Before I could answer, the girls were digging into my pockets, squishing the berries between their fingers while shoving them into their faces.

“Oh elements,” I cried. And we had two more days of this.

* * *

I’d drifted off in Nikkos’s arms during the flight, lulled to sleep by the steady beating of his wings and his heat that wrapped around me like a cozy blanket. I woke when he came to a jarring stop, landing on a thick tree branch. When I looked into his eyes, he held a finger to his lips.

My heart quickened, and I looked for the girls and Blaze, relieved when I spotted them across from us on the opposite tree branch.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered.

“Smell that?” he whispered back.

I sniffed the air, instantly regretting it. The smell was more powerful than an outhouse stench. “Disgusting,” I hissed. “What is it?”

He tightened his grip on me. “Trolls.”

“Ewwie,” Ember cried, plugging her nose. “It stinks!”

Blaze nudged the girls. “Shh.”

“Are they near?” I asked.

Nikkos nodded. “We can’t stay in the mountains tonight.”

Blaze jumped off his branch, and Nikkos followed. They catapulted so fast into the sky, the contents of my stomach rose into my throat.

“Where are we going?” I asked Nikkos once we were high above the clouds.

“We have to go to Ulula,” he answered, his wings heavily beating.

I wrapped my arms tighter around his neck. “Is it a town?”

He nodded. “A shifter stronghold.”

Shifters. My blood turned to ice. My only knowledge of the shifter race came from watching Tari and my parents deal with Adrean Lykaeos, the king of the fallen shifter village. The old burned up wolf was wild and unpredictable, and he carried

around a dragon-sized grudge, snapping at anyone who dared look sideways at him. He was determined to kill King Fachnan for what he'd done to Lupine, but the old shifter could never gather enough warriors for his rebel army. Instead, he thought he could rely on Tari's magic to defeat Fachnan's army. I feared he would get my sister killed with his insane plan to go up against a thousand dragons. Adrean disappeared after my parents told him Tari had been killed. We never saw him again.

“Oh.” I swallowed back my fear, hoping we wouldn't encounter the crazed shifter king. “The giants won't come there?” I asked, hoping they'd rethink their plan to stay there.

Nikkos chuckled. “Not unless they have a death wish.”

I looked over at Blaze as he flew beside us, the girls tucked in tightly, their little brows drawn in consternation. It was clear they wanted out of the sling. “Will the shifters welcome us?”

“Absolutely.” Nikkos nodded toward the girls. “We have two of their kind.”

I swallowed at that. Though I wanted nothing more than to give the children a safe, comfortable bed, I feared the cost of accepting help from the shifters would far outweigh the benefits.

Chapter Nine

We landed on the outskirts of the forest, dark silhouettes of the behemoth trees and mountain range looming behind us—the specters of ancient giants. I wondered how many wars they had witnessed, what stories the trees and mountains could tell if we peeled back their layers.

I squinted in the moonlight at the tall grassy knoll ahead of us. “Where’s Ulula?”

Nikkos gently set me down. “Just over the ridge.”

“This is as far as we can fly,” Blaze answered, waving us forward. “We have to walk from here.”

“Why can’t we fly in?” I asked them as I stretched my sore legs.

“They might shoot us down,” Nikkos answered.

I swallowed at that, feeling less sure about their plan to stay in the shifter stronghold.

Blaze grunted, nearly doubling over when Aurora kicked and squirmed in her sling. “I want to get down.”

“Not yet, darling.” I cupped her cheek, gently stroking her face while speaking in a soothing whisper. “We need you in Uncle Blaze’s arms in case we need to escape.”

Ember heaved a dramatic sigh while hugging her doll to her chest. “I’m tired.”

“I know, sweetheart.” I brushed her bangs off her brow. “Hopefully, we can find a nice bed tonight.”

Nikkos held his hand out to me with a wink. I swear I felt sparks ignite between us when I slipped my hand in his. I gasped, but he refused to release me, my skin buzzing all the way to my toes when he drew circles around my palm with the pad of his thumb.

Squeezing my hand, he flashed sharp incisors. “I promise I won’t bite.”

I wasn't so sure of that, and I wasn't sure I'd mind, either.

He helped me walk up the steep hill, his wings pushing us forward. The grass was so tall, it came to my knees, though it wasn't dry and brittle like the fields by my parents' cottage. It was green and fragrant and brushed up against my skirts like threads of silk. When we reached the top of the knoll, the fortress before us nearly took my breath away. The walls, that were nearly as tall as the massive trees of the Periculian Forest, stretched on forever, disappearing into the fog. I had to strain my neck to see the top. I didn't think there was any possible way a group of shifters could've built something so massive.

On top of the fortress walls were several giant contraptions, pulled back like slingshots, cradling sharpened bolts wider than my leg and as tall as two mages.

Fear numbed my veins at the sight of their pointy tri-tipped blades. "You weren't kidding when you said they might shoot us down."

"Those ballistae are meant for dragons," Nikkos whispered. "There's a rumor this stronghold was originally built by the giants," he continued. "It was abandoned for years until the shifters took it over after Fachnan attacked Lupine."

"Oh." Unease churned my gut. I wondered how many of these survivors were part of the rebels that had once enlisted my sister in their failed idea to take down Fachnan and his dragon army before my parents had the mind spinner change her memories and take her away.

"But they probably won't need them," Blaze added. "We're on Windhaven land now, and Fachnan wouldn't dare risk angering Duke Viggo."

I looked at him. "Why not?"

Blaze slanted a knowing grin. "Because Fachnan needs Viggo's troops if he wants to have a shot at defeating our aerial army."

Nikkos snorted. "Even then, they won't stand a chance against ten thousand fire mages."

“Ten thousand?” I clutched my throat.

“Most of us were born during the Fertilis.” Nikkos squeezed my hand, a gleam in his eyes. “Our mother was a busy woman.”

Indeed, I thought to myself, even as my stomach churned with unease. On the off chance my sister did align with Fachnan’s army, I didn’t think she’d survive a battle with ten thousand fire mages.

Once we reached the giant double doors wide enough to fit a full-size dragon, Blaze cupped his hands around his mouth and called out, “Hey, there!”

A low howl rent the air, sending a chill racing through my bones. I repressed a shiver, then gave a start when the girls howled back, sounding too much like little wolves.

I gaped at them, and they both blinked back at me, their eyes looking far too feral, and I wondered if perhaps they’d have their first shift before they reached puberty. Hopefully not.

A little wooden window above the doors slid open, and unnaturally golden eyes blinked back at us. My knees trembled when a black, furry snout poked out of the window, flashing long, sharp fangs. “State your business,” the creature said in a dark, demonic voice.

“Our family seeks food and shelter for the night,” Blaze called back.

My nieces howled again. What were they saying?

The creature’s nostrils flared as he scowled down at us. Then he slid the door shut with a loud *snap*.

I looked at my nieces. “What were you saying to them?”

Aurora shrugged. “I don’t know, Auntie.”

“It just felt like the thing to do,” Ember added.

I swallowed back a lump in my throat, my hand sweating in Nikkos’s warm grip, though I didn’t dare let go.

“At least they know we have shifters with us,” Blaze whispered.

“What will they do?” I whispered back.

He dragged a hand through his thick hair. “Let us in, hopefully.”

Worry churned my gut. Let us in? Or let just the girls in? “What if they try to take them from me?”

Shadows fell across my mates’ features.

“They won’t,” Nikkos said, squeezing my hand.

I thought about begging them to fly us away from here. “How do you know?”

Blaze’s eyes lit with fire. “Because we’ll incinerate anyone who tries.”

I held my breath when the heavy doors rattled, and I heard the distinct sound of metal clanking and a bolt sliding across wood.

I didn’t know what I’d been expecting. What I wasn’t expecting was an ancient crone with shockingly white hair and a hunched back to come out, slowly hobbling up to us while leaning on her cane. Two young, broad-shouldered men followed behind her, their noses flattened and brown fur sprouted along the sides of their faces and neck. They were mid-shift. Tari had told me that her mates could suspend their shifts so that they looked halfway between man and beast. If the objective was to frighten, they certainly succeeded. My bones quaked with fear at the lethal looks in their eyes, and my bladder nearly emptied itself onto my legs.

As the woman drew closer, I recoiled at the angry, puckered skin on one side of her face and her one white, foggy eye surrounded by a sea of red scar tissue. I knew without a doubt those were dragon fire scars.

I could distinctly hear the echo of my heartbeat pounding in my ears as she finally made her way up to us, standing just an arm’s length away.

She looked at the girls hanging in the sling, and they looked back at her, their eyes wide and curious.

Finally, she cleared her throat. “These children are the offspring of Asher and Finnian Lykaios.”

I breathed out the breath I’d been holding. “They are.”

When she looked at me with that one good eye, I fought the urge to crawl out of my skin. “You’re their mother’s twin.”

“I am.”

“I’m Helena.” She splayed a hand across her heart and bowed. “I was the chief elderwoman of Lupine.” She motioned toward the fortress behind her. “I’m the warden of Ulula.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “I’m Shirina.” I waved to my handsome mages. “These are my mates, Nikkos and Blaze.”

Helena didn’t even acknowledge my mates. Her nostrils flared as she continued to stare at me. “Your magic smells strong.”

I laughed off the compliment. “Not as strong as Tari’s.”

“Different than your sister’s, but don’t underestimate the power of the magic that flows through your veins.” Her eyes narrowed as she looked me over with her one good wolf eye. “Why are you here?”

“We’re taking them to our estate in southern Delfi,” Blaze cut in. “We were hoping for a place to stay for the night. We would’ve slept in a mountain cave, but we smelled troll dung.”

“Yes.” She waved her cane toward the shadowy forest behind us. “A large group of trolls was spotted two days ago. Our trackers said they went back up the mountains, but they have never come this close to our fortress, which is why we’re on high alert.”

Tremors coursed through me. “Do you think they’ll come here?”

“It would be suicide if they did.” She pointed to the huge ballistae aimed at the sky. “But trolls aren’t known to be the

smartest creatures. If they do show, it will be nice to have a few fire mages on our side.” She eyed my mates and then me with that one good eye. “You’re welcome here tonight. Our tavern has rooms and good food.”

“That sounds wonderful.” My shoulders sagged in relief. “Thank you.”

The girls squealed in delight, and Nikkos helped them out of their sling. Blaze rolled his shoulders and neck, then shook out his arms as the girls ran circles around his legs.

“Just a warning, though,” Helena said with a grimace, “Adrean Lykaios frequents the tavern.”

All moisture evaporated from my mouth. I’d been afraid we’d come across him.

Blaze arched a brow. “The Lycan king?”

Helena scowled. “He’s a king no more.”

Ember tugged on my skirt. “Isn’t he our other pappo?”

“Yes.” I cupped her cheek. “He’s your fathers’ father. He survived the bad king’s attack, but he was badly scarred.” I swallowed as my gaze flitted to Helena. When the surviving shifters had first discovered my sister, most of them had refused to let her heal their scars. Tari had told me shifters viewed war scars as badges of honor.

Helena patted Ember on the head. “Inside and out.” Her eyes crinkled as she cupped Aurora’s shoulder. “You’d do best to steer away from him.”

Aurora’s eyes were wide with curiosity. “Why?”

“Just trust me on this.” She tried to stand upright, her bones cracking with the movement. She gave me a stern look. “The girls have holes in their stockings. Have you no change of clothes for them?”

I fought the urge to look away from her scowling face. “I’m afraid we didn’t have time to pack.”

“Why not?”

I shot my mates a nervous look. “My parents didn’t exactly bless our bond.”

“I see.” She frowned, rubbing her pointy chin. “And you didn’t think to leave the children with your parents?”

Spine stiffening, I looked directly into her eyes. “I made two promises to Tari before we lost her.” I chose my words carefully, knowing shifters were good at sniffing out lies. We’d lost her, yes, but she hadn’t died. I would keep that secret until my sister was safe with her family once more. “The first was that should anything ever happen to her, I’d love and raise the girls as if they were my own. The second was that I’d protect them with my life. I have every intention of honoring those promises.”

Blaze cleared his throat, splaying a hand across his heart. “And we would gladly sacrifice our lives to help her keep those promises.”

Nikkos murmured his agreement.

My gaze shot to my mates. They would do that for us? Tears sprung to my eyes, and I had to fight to hold them back. Oh, how lucky I was to have such amazing mates. Yes, they were certainly getting kisses tonight.

“Is there a place where we can purchase fresh clothes and shoes for the girls?” Nikkos asked.

“I will procure them new things,” she said, stiffly, “but you will not be paying. We shifters look out for our own.”

“We would not wish to take advantage of your hospitality.” Blaze pulled a sack out of his pocket, jangling it in his hand. “This should hopefully cover two rooms, meals for us, and clothes for the girls.” He handed her the bag.

She poured ten golden coins into her palm. I’d never seen so much money before.

“Oh. Well. I’m not one to turn down such a generous offer.” Her wide smile revealed one sharp canine and several missing or rotted teeth. “I’ll have my grandsons show you to the tavern.” She nodded toward the huge beasts behind her.

Blaze bowed, his wings fluttering behind him. “Thank you.”

“May we have some coins, Uncle Blaze?” Aurora asked, flashing him a cherubic smile.

He ruffled her hair with a grin. “When we get home, I’ll give you girls each a gold coin if you behave yourselves tonight.”

They squealed with joy, dancing around on their toes while smiling ear to ear.

“Oh, we’ll behave!” Ember exclaimed.

“And no complaints tomorrow when I have to carry you,” Nikkos added.

Their smiles faded, and they scowled at Nikkos as if he’d just taken candy out of their hands.

I covered my mouth to hide my grin. “It was worth a try,” I whispered to Nikkos as he took my hand again.

He simply shook his head and laughed.

* * *

Helena stayed behind while her two frightening companions led us into the compound. The shifter stronghold was a town inside a fortress, with an outdoor market, several dozen huts with smoking chimneys, and a tavern with an attached inn. Blaze and Nikkos had to each carry a girl, since the ground was covered in red, sticky clay that stained the soles of my shoes. I breathed through a wheeze, as the air reeked of manure, piss, and roasting meat. Music echoed all around us. Everywhere we turned, there was a group of shifters with drums and stringed instruments sitting on overturned barrels and crates while playing for a small crowd or just to themselves. As we crossed past several crude buildings, shifters wearing coarse clothes came outside to stare at us, their expressions turning from caution to shock when they set eyes on the girls.

“Why do they all look at us?” Ember loudly whispered while blatantly staring back.

“Your pappos were their kings,” I answered, warily eyeing the inhabitants of this strange town.

Some of the shifters looked like humans, some looked like something in-between, with furry faces and pointy ears, and others were something entirely different, nightmarish wolf creatures with long, pointy snouts. They stood on two bent legs and towered over my mates.

“And our daddies?” Aurora asked.

“No,” I answered out of the corner of my mouth while keeping an eye on each creature that we passed. “They were princes.”

Once they ushered us inside the tavern, my relief at escaping the watchful eyes outside was replaced with terror at the creatures inside. They were all mid-shift or fully shifted into those big beasts with jagged spines and hunched backs covered in fur. Their long, sharp claws looked like daggers, and I imagined they could easily slash a person to bits in just a few seconds. I kept my gaze on Blaze’s winged back as we walked through the dark tavern with the low, sagging ceiling, lit only by a handful of scattered candles and lanterns. The place smelled of mildew, wet dog fur, and stale ale breath. Elements, I preferred caves to this place. These shifters didn’t smell much better than trolls.

The shifters parted, their eyes flashing with recognition when they noticed the girls, and we made our way to a small table at a darkened end of the tavern beneath the staircase. My mates set the girls down on a bench before turning to the serving girl and ordering stew and bread for everyone.

Aurora splayed her hands across the table’s rough wood. “Do they have tarts?” she asked.

I dragged a hand down my face, expelling a deep breath. “Not here, darling.”

Ember clutched her doll while wiggling around in her seat. “Bethamy is hungry, too, Auntie.”

I brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. “You can give her some bread, okay?”

She silently nodded, then rocked her doll in her arms.

Nikkos hunched over beneath the slanted ceiling, standing protectively behind our table. Blaze excused himself to speak with the inn keeper.

I stood beside Nikkos, trying to keep my gaze fixed on the girls rather than the dozens of drunk wolves staring at us.

“What are *they* doing here?” a gravelly voice growled.

My gaze snapped up, and I stared at an older wolf-man with patchy fur and red scars all down his face and chest. One side of his face looked like a melted ball of wax, the eye socket a sloped, empty hole.

Adrean. The surviving Lycan king.

I bristled at the way he glared at the children as if they were infectious parasites. “They’re with me.”

He cut a glare to me, rage reflected in his one hooded eye. His top lip pulled back in a predator’s snarl. “You’re her twin.”

“I’m Tarianya’s twin, yes.” I turned up my chin, refusing to be intimidated by the scowling old mongrel. “You’re Adrean Lykaios, the surviving Lupine King.”

“There is no king here,” a deep voice slurred behind him. “Only a coward, but if you’re looking for a *real* shifter, I can be of service.”

A middle-aged shifter with an unsteady gait, pale skin covered in fine brown fur, eyes blacker than tar, and a distended beer belly stepped from behind Adrean while clutching a large tankard of ale like a lifeline.

Adrean didn’t even bother to defend his honor as he stood there with stooped shoulders, his gaze turned toward the floor.

I didn’t hide my revulsion as I looked this strange shifter over. “I don’t believe you’re part of this conversation.”

“Forgive me, lass.” He hitched a grin, his glassy eyes sharpening as he nodded toward Adrean. “I didn’t think you’d want to waste your time on this drunkard.”

“That’s right. You didn’t *think*.” I waved him away like I was shooing a fly. “Leave us.” I infused a touch of my siren’s call into my voice, not enough to force him to obey, but strong enough to hopefully persuade him to make the right choice.

He took a step back, confusion flashing in his eyes as he shook his head like he was trying to clear water from his ears. Then he looked at me and let out a menacing growl that reverberated my bones.

A flash of white, and Nikkos lit up like a falling comet, twin balls of flames extending from his hands. He stood protectively beside me, barring his fangs, the warmth radiating off him so powerful, sweat trickled down my back and brow.

“You heard my mate,” he snapped. Flames arced off his hands, the embers falling at the shifter’s feet.

I cringed as I looked above me at the black smoke stains spreading across the ceiling.

The shifter growled again and then thankfully backed away.

Aurora squinted up at Nikkos. “You’re too hot,” she grumbled.

Nikkos put away his fire and winked at the girls. “That was the point.”

Ember pointed her straw doll at Adrean. “You’re our other pappo.”

Adrean lifted his gaze to her, the pain reflecting in his one good eye like a flare pulsing off him. “I’m nobody’s pappo.”

The girls flinched as if they’d been struck, and my heart imploded. I wanted to lash out at the old fool for hurting my nieces, but I felt too sorry for him. With the exception of the girls, he’d lost his entire family. I wanted to tell the old shifter to have hope, that his sons might still be alive, but what if I was wrong? Or worse, what if Malvolia’s mages had already killed them? I swallowed back my sorrow. “Will you not at least acknowledge your grandchildren?”

His jaw hardened. “They’re better off not knowing me.”

The girls gasped, and I wrapped my arms around them, my heart breaking for them and their pappo.

Blaze sidestepped around him, ushering us forward. "I've secured us adjoining rooms. We can eat in there."

"Good idea." I grabbed the girls' hands. "Come on, darlings."

We walked around Adrean as he stood there in the center of the tavern, his gaze on the floor.

We followed my mates toward a crooked, dark staircase. Wings tucked behind them and fire in their eyes, they glared at any shifter who stared at us overly long.

Just as we'd reached the landing, Ember pulled out of my grasp. "Wait," she called.

"Ember!" I pulled Aurora with me as we dodged grumbling shifters and chased after her.

My mates let out a string of curses and followed after us.

By the time we reached Ember, she was standing beneath her pappo's long shadow, and I swear my heart imploded as I watched this sweet, innocent child, completely unflinching as she looked up at this big, bad wolf.

"Here." She tried to hand him her doll. He refused to take it, so she hooked the end of the straw foot around his extended claws.

I finally reached her, grasping her shoulder and gently pulling her back. "Em," I whispered, "what are you doing?"

"Giving Pappo Bethamy." She nodded toward her grandfather who stood as still as stone, the straw doll dangling from his limp hand. "She makes me feel better when I'm sad." She wiped her eyes. "He needs her more than I do."

I knelt beside her, looking into her glossy eyes. "That's very kind of you, Em," I said as I wiped a tear from her cheek, "but you don't have to."

"I want to." She bit her quivering lip, and I could tell it was taking all her willpower not to ask for that doll back.

I scooped her up, and she straddled my waist, wrapping her arms around my neck. Nikkos took Aurora, and we backed up a step from Adrean as he stood there completely immobile, his gaze still fixed on the floor. A blade pierced my chest when the old wolf curved his claws inward, hooking the doll in his grasp.

Ember silently cried against me as we carried the girls upstairs. I cursed King Fachnan for what he'd done to shifter-kind, how he'd torn apart my family, and I swore with my last dying breath, if I ever had a chance to confront him, I'd make him carve out his own blackened heart.

* * *

Our rooms were sparsely furnished, each with a bed, table, and dresser that had been crudely fashioned out of rough wood. A few of the floorboards were starting to curl, rendering themselves hazardous lumps beneath the threadbare carpets. I had already pointed them out to the girls, but they were so clumsy, I prayed they didn't forget and trip over them. Our rooms were separated with a warped door, each with a bed that was infested with fleas. One jumped onto Aurora the moment she climbed on top of the lumpy straw mattress. Blaze and Nikkos had to smoke the bugs out and then open the windows when the heat and smoke became unbearable.

The servants added a few extra chairs to the wobbly wooden table, the wooden floorboards creaking with their heavy steps, and we dined in our bedroom by firelight. My mates had left the curtains drawn, revealing a bright, half-moon outside that helped add light to our dark room.

I smiled to myself when Blaze cut an extra slice of bread for Aurora and buttered it for her and when Nikkos leaned over Ember, wiping sauce from her chin. As I looked from the girls to my mates, I realized how much we felt like a family. The girls had quickly taken to my mates, and my mates had readily assumed the roles of surrogate fathers. I silently thanked the elements for sending my mates to us when we needed them most. Even if Draevyn hadn't worked out, at least I had two loyal and protective mates to call my own. I was by far luckier than most Fae women.

The stew was delicious, a savory, thick broth of meat, root vegetables, and spices. My mates and I drank a heady spiced wine that made my head float like a cloud, and for the first time in days, the tension that had coiled around my spine started to unwind, even though it took too much prodding for me to get Ember to eat.

“What if she’s hungry?” she asked me while picking at her stew.

I gave my mates a helpless look.

“I can go get her if you’d like,” Blaze said to her. “I’m sure he’ll give her back.”

She vehemently shook her head, more tears springing to her eyes.

Nikkos squeezed her hand. “I’ll go downstairs and make sure he knows to feed her, okay?”

She wiped her nose with the back of her hand, nodding.

Afterwards, Nikkos gave each of the girls a ginger candy, and he and Blaze retired to their room. A servant brought in a big, wooden tub, and the girls and I had our first warm bath in days. It felt so wonderful to scrub off the grime we’d collected on our travels. I climbed out of the tub, drying my hair by the fire while the girls splashed and played.

As I was about to wrap a threadbare towel around my breasts, I caught a glimpse of my nude body in the cracked wall mirror. I wondered what it would feel like to have my mates’ hands on my round and full breasts, my nipples pebbled even in the warm air by the fire. Closing my eyes, I imagined them touching me, their calloused yet gentle hands in my hair and between my legs. The thought of their skin branding mine made my spine tingle with anticipation. Would I let them go further than a kiss tonight? Would I let them claim what so many men before them had tried to take, some by force? I swallowed back those memories, pushing those negative thoughts from my head. I wouldn’t let the ghosts from my past haunt me now and ruin our evening.

I frowned at my reflection in the mirror again, at my narrow waist, my ribs protruding beneath my skin, and worried they would find I was too thin. This winter had been hard, and we'd had to ration food. Of course, the children always had plenty to eat. My mother and I would refuse the last crust of bread so that they had full bellies.

I couldn't deny I was looking forward to going to Abyssus and trying a tart while drinking tea that wasn't stale. Most importantly, I was looking forward to giving the girls a better childhood than my own.

We changed into new underthings and pale nightgowns. Blaze had found the girls slipper shoes and patched, though warm, stockings. We also received newish dresses to wear for tomorrow. The dull brown material was coarse, but at least the clothes were clean. Perhaps my favorite gifts were the hair ribbons, however faded, and the worn brush. It felt so good to brush the tangles out of my hair. After I tied it back with a ribbon, I combed the girls' hair and tied theirs up, too. Together, we sang a song that my mother had sung to us too many times to count.

'Ribbons for her hair

And flowers for her crown

To turn his head and right her frown.'

I smiled to myself, wondering if I would turn my mates' heads tonight.

Afterwards, two husky shifter women came in and removed the tub, carrying it straight into my mates' room. I climbed into bed between the girls, tucking them in tight while praying my mates had killed all the bugs. The girls curled into me, sprawling out across my waist, sucking on their thumbs while I stroked their backs. Oh, how I adored them. I didn't think I could love children of my own womb more than I loved these two little cherubs.

Aurora blinked up at me, moonlight making her silvery eyes shine like shimmery pools during a winter's frost. "Will you sing us a goodnight song?"

I stroked her smooth brow. “Of course, baby.” I was in no rush to leave them, and not just because I didn’t like parting with them, but because coward that I was, I was having second thoughts about sneaking into my mates’ room. What if I didn’t want more than a kiss? Would they try to persuade me, force me? I swallowed back my fear. No, my mates were different than most men, than *those* men.

“Auntie?” Aurora tugged on my braid. “Aren’t you going to sing to us?”

I tapped her nose, forcing dark thoughts out of my mind while smiling down at her. “Of course, angel.”

I closed my eyes, recalling the words to our mother’s lullaby.

*‘Sleep, little lambs
And morning will bring
Sunshine and daisies
And new songs to sing.
Rest, little fawns
And when you awake
The grains we will grow
For bread to bake.
Dream, little birds,
Even when you rest
Always will I love
The ones I love best.’*

And I meant every word. When I opened my eyes, they were blinking up at me, not a hint of sleep in their eyes.

Ember sniffled, then buried her head against my ribs. Shadows eclipsed my heart. She missed Bethamy, which meant either I or one of my mates would have to go retrieve it from Adrean. Flaming troll turds! We’d never be rid of that ratty little doll.

I cupped her chin, turning her head toward me. “What’s the matter, baby?”

She looked at me through a sheen of tears. “I miss Pappo and Yaya.”

Aurora pouted. “Me, too.”

Oh. My heart twisted at their confessions. I’d been so preoccupied with rescuing them from the mind spinner, I hadn’t thought that they’d miss their grandparents. “I’m sorry, darlings.” I sat up against the driftwood headboard, pulling them with me. “It’s not safe to be with them right now.”

Ember sniffled, wiping her nose on the sheets. “Will we ever see them again?”

I forced a smile. “I’m sure we will.” Though I wasn’t confident it would be an amicable meeting.

The door leading to my mates’ room cracked open, and they poked their heads inside, giving me an expectant look.

I immediately felt self-conscious in my thin night shift. I pulled the covers up to my waist, silently cursing when the girls kicked them back down.

Aurora turned on her side, tucking her hands beneath her head. “Why won’t our wolf pappo talk to us?”

I was keenly aware of my mates approaching the bed, the sounds of their muted footsteps and their ruffling feathers drawing closer. I did my best to focus on the girls, though I swore I felt my mates’ heated gazes roaming the length of my barely clad body.

“I imagine he’s too sad to talk after what the bad king did to his family,” I said to the girls.

Ember sniffled. “I miss Bethamy.”

Blaze dipped the bed as he sat down beside us, the warmth from his body radiating outward and caressing my bare skin like a whisper. “Do you want me to go back and get her?”

She shook her head. “Then our wolf pappo will be sad.”

Nikkos knelt at the foot of the bed, his face cast in shadow, his wings partially open, and he reminded me too much of the angel of death, though I didn't fear him. "Girls, tomorrow night we'll be at Abyssus."

My breath hitched. Tomorrow night? Oh elements. Where I'd be forced to tolerate Draevyn's sour moods again. Goddess help me.

"And do you know that we have a big nursery with all kinds of pretty dolls?" Nikkos continued.

"Really?" Both girls shot up.

"What do they look like?" Aurora squealed.

"They have rosy cheeks and silk dresses," Nikkos answered, "and their hair and faces look real."

Ember's eyes sparkled with stardust. "May we play with them?"

Nikkos and Blaze shared a look.

"You may keep them if you like," Blaze answered.

Both girls gasped, looking as if they'd seen a ghost.

"But don't they belong to other children?" Aurora asked.

"No." Blaze's eyes softened with distant memories. "Our mother kept a large nursery with all kinds of toys for all the children that visited our estate."

"Nobody has played with these dolls in almost 25 years," Nikkos said, his bottom lip turning down in an exaggerated pout. "I imagine they're very lonely."

Ember squeezed her sister's hand. "We'll keep them company."

"Tomorrow night, then." Blaze stood, and there was no mistaking the flame in his eyes as his gaze locked with mine.

"You'll also get a big bedroom with a soft bed and many more toys," Nikkos added.

"And Cook will make us tarts." Aurora giggled.

I couldn't look away from Blaze, even if I tried. It was as if his darkened eyes had harnessed the power of the siren's call. A smile hinted at his feral, sensual mouth. "And Cook will make you tarts."

"And tea that isn't stale," I thought I heard Aurora say.

A swarm of butterflies unleashed in my chest as Blaze held me trapped beneath his gaze.

"Fresh tea with cream and sugar," he answered.

Elements help me, my thighs quivered when he slowly dragged his tongue across his lips, and I had a sudden visual of that sensual tongue licking all over me.

"I think we'll like Abyssus," Ember squealed.

I managed to drag my gaze away from Blaze, and my heart warmed to see my nieces smiling, though their eyes were heavy with sleep. Not long, and I could sneak off with my mates.

"Thank you," I mouthed to my winged warriors.

"You're welcome," they mouthed back, their eyes darkened with desire.

"We'll be just through this door if you need anything." Nikkos nodded toward the warped door as he and his brother made a slow retreat.

"I may need something later..." I bit my lip, summoning the courage to voice my desires. "After the girls fall asleep."

My mates stopped, looking as if they were about to combust into flame, and I felt the pull of desire thrumming between us.

"Goodnight," I said to them while batting my lashes.

"Goodnight," they both said, each giving me one last lingering look before shutting the door behind them.

Oh elements. My bones turned to liquid lava, and I feared I'd melt into the sheets. A slow steady heartbeat pounded between my thighs, and I knew, I knew all I had to do was spread my legs, and my mates would devour me. Goddess

save me, how badly I wanted to sink beneath passion's tide with them and never come up for air.

"I like it here, Auntie," Aurora said, her voice thick with fatigue. "Their beds are nicer than our bed."

"And your bed at Abyssus will be even nicer," I whispered to them as I resumed scratching their backs, doing my best to coax them to sleep.

I wanted them. I wanted my mates. I was no longer afraid of the flame in their eyes. I wanted to be consumed by their fire.

"Auntie, is this a safe place to disappear to if we get in trouble?"

I looked down at Aurora, cursing myself for not thinking of it sooner. My nieces and I hadn't established a safe place. Not that I thought we'd need it, but we could never be too sure. "Yes, darling," I said to her while stroking her forehead. "If we're in danger, you take your sister here." I motioned toward Ember, who was already sleeping beside me.

Aurora yawned before snuggling closer to me. "What if it's not safe here, either?"

"Then return to the cave where we slept last night," I said to her. "And if that cave's not safe, then go to the other one."

"Yes, Auntie," she slurred before closing her eyes.

I laid with them while listening to their gentle snores. No way was I falling asleep as my desire for my mates grew with each pounding heartbeat.

Tonight I would surrender to this burning love. Tonight my mates would hopefully drive away my nightmares.

* * *

I stood at the door to my mates' room, my hand pressed upon the wood, wondering, worrying if I should turn back. Was I ready to be alone with them? Curling my fingers into the door's uneven slats, I released a trembling breath, fearing what would happen if I opened that door while equally afraid of turning back. The embers they'd stirred within my soul burned

brighter with each pounding heartbeat. I wanted them. I needed them.

And then the door opened, and the decision was made for me when Blaze stood on the other side of the threshold, that smoldering look in his eyes as he took in the sight of me. I was keenly aware that I wore nothing else but that thin nightdress, my nipples hardening beneath his bold stare. Water drops dripped off his hair and clung to his bronzed skin, and he wore nothing but a threadbare towel wrapped around his waist exposing a broad chest and all that glorious muscle. I balled up my hands until nails broke skin, fighting the urge to run my fingers across the swirling flame tattoos that dissected the front of his chest.

Holy flames!

I felt as if I was dream-walking as I took his damp, but warm hand and let him lead me into their room just as Nikkos was emerging from the big wooden tub, water droplets clinging to every gloriously hard angle of his wide chest and flat stomach. And then my gaze dipped lower. I couldn't help myself, but Nikkos had wrapped his wings around himself, covering that most intimate part with the tips of his feathers. My gaze shot back up to his face, and I wanted to die from embarrassment at the knowing gleam in his eyes and his oh-so-wicked grin.

“I can open my wings if you want,” he teased.

I bit my lip, turning my back to him while sitting on the edge of the bed.

Blaze held out a goblet, and I eagerly took it, mainly to hide my smile behind the rim. He then poured a drink for his brother and one for himself before holding up his goblet.

“A toast,” he said, his eyes shimmering with desire. “To our beautiful mate, and to the Elements for leading us to her.”

“And to my brave fire mages,” I blurted, forcing out the words before I lost my nerve. “For finding me when I needed you most.” Those last words came out on a rasp, my throat constricting with so many emotions that I dared not think on

overly long. But they had found us just in time. I didn't know what would've happened to the girls and me if they hadn't saved us.

But now was not the time to dwell on the negative. Now was the time to celebrate and maybe steal a few moments of pleasure among the chaos. I gulped down several sips of spiced wine, the mild fruity taste a welcome distraction to the two virile males whose very essence filled every corner of the room and lit every dark chasm in my soul.

Elements, I wanted them.

I drank down the last of the wine and thrust the goblet into Blaze's hands. "More, please."

"Careful, Shirina." Blaze's eyes darkened to two inky pools of lust, strong, musky pheromones clinging to him like a second skin as he grabbed a jug off the table by the bed and poured more wine into my goblet. "If you drink too much, it will be easy to take advantage of you."

Emboldened by the fire swirling in my veins, I took the wine from him, eyeing him over the rim. "I know."

He chuckled, sitting beside me, his damp feathers tickling my neck and sending more trills of lust skipping across my spine.

Nikkos stalked up to me like a dragon cornering a lamb, a threadbare towel hanging low across his hips. Elements, his body was glorious, every hard angle sculpted to perfection. He had flame tattoos similar to Blaze's. My gaze was drawn to that line of dark hair extending from his naval, then disappearing beneath the towel. Oh, how I wished I could rip away that towel and follow the trail to that growing bulge beneath the fabric.

Nikkos leaned over me, his hair dripping water onto my chest, his fanged smile the devil incarnate. "Have you come for that kiss?"

"Maybe." I finished off the last of the wine and handed the empty goblet back to Blaze. "I wanted to talk first."

"Of course."

A zing shot through my veins when Nikkos sat on my other side, gently grasping my knee. I cleared my throat, trying not to be distracted by my mates' musky smell and the way their warmth enveloped me like a sensual hug.

"About the other night," I said, knowing we couldn't go any further until I knew they didn't suspect the worst of me. "I did lie about my nieces' fathers." Casting my gaze to my lap, I twisted the hem of my gown around my finger. "The truth is I don't know if they are dead or alive, and I didn't want to give the girls false hope. All this time I've believed them to be dead, just like I've believed Tari to be dead." I heaved a weary sigh. "Then I overheard my parents saying Tari is alive and her mates might be alive, too. Until I know for certain, I'm going to assume they're dead."

"We understand." Blaze leaned into me, his wingtips tickling my arm and causing my gooseflesh to rise. "We knew you had good reason."

Relief swept through me, but also sadness and despair. How were these two so easily accepting and trusting of me when their brother accused me of being a liar and treated me with scorn?

I swallowed, looking into Blaze's eyes. "Should I tell Adrean?"

He took my hand in his. "How do you know he doesn't already know?"

"You saw him." I shook my head. "That's the face of a father who's lost everything."

Nikkos squeezed my knee. "I wouldn't give him false hope just yet."

"Shirina." Blaze visibly swallowed. "When we saw your sister, she was flying with Prince Helian on his dragon toward Fallax. Those islands are infested with wyverns."

"I know." My voice constricted with fear. "Perhaps she can control them like Maiadra did."

"For your sake," Nikkos said, "I hope so, but..." He trailed off.

“But what?” I asked.

“If the prophecy is true, she will kill our queen.” His wings drooped behind him. “I don’t want that, either.”

Ugh. I was so sick of this damn prophecy from some nameless seer. Why did everyone accept it as truth? “This prophecy isn’t true.” Ire flooded my veins, and I had to work hard to unclench my teeth. “My sister will never join forces with Fachnan after what he did to shifter-kind.”

“I hope you’re right.” Nikkos paused, swallowing. “For all our sakes.”

“We’ve all been put in impossible situations.” I swallowed back my sorrow, my heart feeling like it would implode from the weight of the world thrust upon it. “The winds of fate have not been kind to us.”

“No, they haven’t,” Nikkos said on a sigh as he wrapped a strand of my hair around his finger. “Except, they gave us you, Shirina, and for that I will thank the fates every day.”

Emotion tightened my throat, and it took me a moment before I could speak. Biting my lip, I looked up at them through hooded eyes. “You may both call me Shiri if you like.”

Blaze scooted closer to me, draping a wing over my shoulder. “I’d like that, Shiri.”

Nikkos’s bright smile banished those shadows in my heart. “Shiri?”

I leaned against him when he wrapped a wing around me, the wine swimming in my head. “Yes.”

He gently cupped my chin. “May we have a kiss?”

The air expelled from my lungs as I went boneless in his arms, and I could barely find the strength to speak. “Yes.”

When Nikkos leaned over me, his lips softly grazing mine, I swear starbursts exploded behind my eyes. It could’ve been the effects of the wine, but I preferred to believe his kiss was magical.

“How was that?”

Heat pulsed through me, spreading to that aching spot between my legs. “I feel like my whole body is on fire.”

“Me, too. More so than usual.”

At the sound of Blaze loudly clearing his throat, I turned into his arms, our mouths joining together, his wings wrapping protectively around me. He stroked my face, coaxing me to open to him. My lips parted, and his tongue dove inside. He tasted like sulfur and sweet wine. He deepened the kiss, passionately claiming me, and I melted, melted, until we both tumbled onto the bed.

Nikkos fell with us and turned me into him. I alternated between kissing them both, each kiss growing more passionate as I ran my hands across their hard chests and flat abdomens.

I cried into Blaze’s mouth, arching into him when he tenderly stroked my breast, pinching my nipple through the fabric. I gasped, a zing of lightning shooting through me. His touch was exquisite, and I couldn’t get enough of him.

“Shiri.” Blaze pulled back, panting into my mouth, his hand gently massaging my breast. “If you don’t stop us, we’re going to make love to you.”

My legs involuntarily spread. “Oh.”

Blaze brushed a strand of hair from my brow, the flames of desire swirling in his eyes. “Is that what you want?”

I bit my lip, looking from Blaze to Nikkos. Did I want them? Yes, oh elements, yes! But I had no idea what to do. “I-I,” I stammered, embarrassment heating my face. “I’ve never.”

“That’s okay.” Starlight shone in Blaze’s eyes as his hand moved to the other breast. “We’ll show you.”

My eyelids fluttered shut as I groaned aloud, desire thrumming through me like a heartbeat. Oh elements, I was going to melt into the bed and never recover.

“But if we take your blood, we’ll be able to project our thoughts into your head.”

“W-what?” I slurred, looking at Nikkos through heavy-lidded eyes. “Oh. Like with Tari and me?” I asked them.

Blaze and Nikkos shared a look.

Blaze shrugged. “I think that’s how it works. We’ve never spoken telepathically before.”

Oh, yes, only twin siblings could speak telepathically as far I knew.

“And if you take our blood, we will be able to hear your thoughts, but only when you project them to us.” Blaze’s hand stilled on my breast as he looked deep into my eyes. “Is that what you want?”

I’d be able to mind-speak them? Elements, did I want that? Did I have a choice? I needed them like a drug. I didn’t think I would have the strength to walk away from them now. “I want...” Desire liquified my bones as I melted into the mattress. “I need you to put out these flames,” I spoke on a breathy whisper. “I need your fire.”

Their wings snapped open and their towels fell off, fire swirling in their eyes, the veins in their arms and chests swelling with dark flame. Blaze looked like a wild animal as he grasped his huge erection, his large hand barely wrapping around the thick shaft. I gaped from him to his brother, who was equally huge. Elements, how would they fit? Before I knew what was happening, Blaze removed my gown, exposing my nipples to the cool night air. I instinctively covered my breasts, but he peeled away my arms.

“Don’t hide your beautiful body from us, my love.” He bent over me and suckled on my breast.

I cried out, nearly flying off the bed, the sensation so overpowering as that heartbeat between my legs pounded out an excruciating rhythm.

I rolled my head back, widening my legs. “Please,” I begged, grasping Blaze’s hair by the roots as he trailed kisses up my neck. “Please.”

“Patience,” he purred, nibbling on my ear.

I felt hands on my ankles, and I looked down to see Nikkos's face between my legs, his wings pinned back as he dug thick fingers into my thighs. What was he going to do? I shivered when he flashed a devious, fanged grin. And then his tongue darted out, and I practically flew to the ceiling when he dragged it between my legs. I bowed up, gasping when he licked me again and again, each stroke sending me spiraling toward heaven. When he suckled on that aching bud, I lost myself to the pleasure, squirming beneath his ministrations while his brother feasted my breasts. Nikkos released me just before I was about to fall into oblivion.

Blaze reached between my legs, his finger swirling around that aching spot that Nikkos had just tortured. Nikkos dove between my legs again, spearing me with his tongue, and I wept from the pleasure. I cried out, gasping, gasping, my heart feeling like it was about to beat out of my chest as my desire crested, holding me immobile in its grasp before releasing me and then capturing me again. I felt a flood pour out of me as Nikkos licked up my juices while purring against my quivering skin. Then he flashed his fangs and crawled between my legs, his large, thick spear poised next to my dripping sex.

It wouldn't fit, but I spread my legs anyway. I wanted him. I *needed* him.

And then he thrust into me, and I cried out from the pain.

His wings flapping open, he steadied himself while holding deep inside me and tenderly kissing my lips. *I'm sorry, Shiri.* His voice echoed in my head, though his lips didn't move. *The pain will pass, I promise.*

I cupped his sweet face, smiling up at him. "I hear you," I whispered.

He gently touched the tip of his nose to mine. *Do you want me to hear you?*

I eagerly nodded. He bit down on his plump bottom lip with the tip of his fang. Then he kissed me again, and I suckled the blood from his mouth. *Can you hear me?* I asked him through thought.

He smiled, his eyes swirling with starlight. *I can.*

I draped my arms around his wide shoulders and raised my hips higher, realizing I'd grown accustomed to his size. Much to my dismay, he pulled out of me with a grimace.

What are you doing? I protested.

But then Blaze took his place between my thighs, that feral look in his eyes causing a shiver to race down my spine. I cried out when he plowed into me in one jarring thrust. I felt nestled in a cocoon of love when he bent over me, wrapping me up in his wings. Even in the darkness of his embrace, his eyes shone like wildfire, reflecting the flames from within.

My powerful mage. My passionate lover. My forever mate.

I'm sorry, my love. His voice echoed through me as his lips found mine.

I tasted blood on his lips, surrendering to his dominance when he deepened the kiss. *It's okay,* I reassured him through thought, clinging to him as he rocked into me. *Just don't stop. Please don't stop.*

Never, my darling. His sweet words echoed in my mind. *You're mine now.*

We continued to kiss, our hands exploring each other's bodies inside our cocoon of love while he thrust gently into me taking me higher and higher to pleasure's pinnacle until I could no longer hold back the rising wave of euphoria cresting over me. Captive to passion's spell, I shuddered again and again, and he stilled with a hiss, his massive length pulsing inside me like a heartbeat.

Oh elements, I had no idea I'd find the portal to heaven inside a fire mage's wings.

I balked when he pulled out.

I'll be back, he growled, raking his teeth across my neck.

I shuddered again beneath his touch.

I nodded, cutting my gaze to Nikkos who stood beside the bed, waiting patiently for me while stroking his massive

erection. I gasped when I looked between my thighs. They were smeared with blood and sticky seed. I thanked Blaze when he wiped my thighs and dripping sex with his towel.

I welcomed Nikkos with open arms when he climbed between my legs, expecting him to plow into me, but he didn't. He took his time loving and tenderly kissing me while gliding his hard length across my slick sex. The feeling was so exquisite, setting my blood aflame, I thought I'd overheat from the pleasure of it. And then he wrapped me up in his wings and rolled me over until I was straddling him, his wings fanned out across the bed.

I felt self-conscious, my breasts heaving as I splayed my hands across his chest. *I don't know what to do.*

Like this. He grabbed my hips, raising me up, before thrusting into me.

I cried out, falling forward, the pleasure from the fullness of him inside me bordering on pain.

His fingers dug into my breasts while he thrust into me again and again. *Ride me, my love.*

I gasped, but moved in opposition to him, meeting each thrust while I ground against him. The feeling was glorious. Together, we found our rhythm, moving harder, faster, his warmth enveloping me as sweat clung to my hair and dripped down my back. But I didn't mind the heat. I needed more Nikkos. More speed. More thrust. More of him filling me. More. More. More.

He stilled with a groan, just as I reached the pinnacle that held me in its brutal grasp, my sheath pulsing around him while milking him into me. I fell apart in his arms, and he rolled me over, plastering my face with kisses. Blaze joined us, stroking my arms, my back, and I couldn't get enough of my fire mages as they took turns making love to me again and again.

Chapter Ten

I woke in a warm embrace to misty morning sunlight streaming into the room, lighting up my mates' wingtips in a myriad of hues while illuminating dust particles around us. My veins hummed with magic. I had no other way to describe it other than I had a burning in my veins unlike anything I'd felt before. Was this the result of bonding with fire mages, or was it something more? I lifted my hand to a beam of sunlight, my fingers bathed in amber and gold. My flesh didn't look different, but I *felt* different. I wondered if my mates felt changed, too. Perhaps it was just love for my two amazing mates setting fire to my blood.

I heaved a sigh of contentment. My leg was draped across Nikkos's flat stomach while Blaze was pressed against my back. There was not a single blanket on the bed, and yet my bones were warm and my insides liquified. I'd never felt more sated in all my life. It could've been that I was bone tired after my mates had made love to me most of the night. Either way, I could get used to sleeping like this.

Blaze stirred behind me, his hard length pressing into my backside. I turned into his arms, smiling as he looked at me through hazy eyes.

Good morning, I said through thought. How odd it was to mind-speak someone again. I hadn't been able to project my voice into another person's head since Tari had been taken from us.

Even in the early morning hours, the wicked gleam in his eyes stirred my desire. *Good morning, my beautiful mate*. His deep voice echoed in my head as he stroked the side of my face, causing my eyelids to flutter.

Mm. I purred. When I felt Nikkos stir behind me, I switched to speaking aloud, since the brothers couldn't mind-speak with each other. "How about we stay here another day?" Namely, in this bed.

Blaze frowned. “As much as we could stay in bed and make love to you all day, we need to get you and the girls to Abyssus.”

Damn. The girls. They’d be waking up soon and would demand my attention. I heaved a sigh. “I suppose you’re right.”

A warm hand grasped my shoulder, and I turned into Nikkos.

His smile was brighter than morning sunshine. “The walls there are fortified for trolls and our mages are better equipped to fight them.”

Frowning, I snuggled against him. That’s when his hard length stabbed my pelvis as desire swirled in his eyes.

Biting down on my lower lip, I cast my gaze toward that large protrusion between us. They were both so big that I wondered how they’d managed to fit inside me. I was willing to try it again, though. And again. And again. And again.

“Auntie!”

Aurora’s shrill cry was a cold bucket of water snuffing out my desire.

My mates cursed as I sunk into the bed, draping a hand across my brow. “I’ll be right there, girls.” I kissed each of my mates before locating my night shift on the floor. I shook the dust off and turned around. Warmth flooded my face when I noticed my naked mates lying on their backs while staring appreciatively at me, their erections jutting toward the ceiling.

I would help you, Blaze said through thought, mischief swirling in his eyes as he motioned down at his stiff member, *but I’m not fit for company.*

“Sorry I can’t do anything about it right now,” I said with a wink while slipping into my night shift, “but I certainly can try when we reach Abyssus.”

My mates both jumped up from bed, their wings flapping.

Nikkos flashed a fanged grin. “Even more reason to get going.”

“Give us a minute,” Blaze said as he shrugged one leg into his pants.

“Of course.” I heaved open the warped door, slipping into the adjoining room, not surprised to see both my nieces standing at the door while giving me accusatory looks.

Aurora crossed her arms and tapped her foot, her little brow creased. She reminded me too much of her Yaya before she was about to launch into a lecture. “Why didn’t you sleep with us?”

Ember gave me an expectant look while sucking on her thumb.

I looked from one girl to the other. “I wanted to spend time with my mates.”

Aurora made a face. “Were you kissing and rubbing each other like Yaya and Pappo do?”

Oh elements! I closed my eyes with a sigh, silently cursing my parents for not being more discreet with their affection. Too many nights I remembered waking up to the sounds of their moans while the headboard rattled. I cringed when I realized my mates and I hadn’t exactly been quiet last night.

I knelt beside them, grasping their hands. “Girls, listen to me. Uncle Nikkos and Uncle Blaze are my fated mates, so, yes, we will sometimes kiss.”

Aurora arched a brow. “And rub together?”

My face instantly ignited as I heaved a shaky sigh. “Oh, Aurora.”

“Who’s ready to go to Abyssus?” a familiar voice boomed behind me. “If we leave now, we might get there in time for tarts.”

I looked behind me at Blaze, mouthing my thanks as he slipped into the room.

The girls squealed, then ran around Blaze’s legs. “Tarts! Tarts! Tarts!” they chanted.

Blaze sidled up to me, the gleam in his eyes making my spine go weak, and I wondered if the girls would behave if we snuck back into his room.

You owe me, he said through thought, his eyes darkening with desire.

Jutting my hands on my hips, I turned up my chin. *Oh, do I?*

Yes. He pressed into my back, whispering hot and heavy in my ear. *Some rubs when we get to Abyssus.*

I covered my mouth to hide a smile while the girls watched us with curiosity. *You're perfectly wicked.*

You've only scratched the surface of my wickedness, my love. His teeth scraped my ear, causing a shiver to steal down my spine. *Tonight I'm going to teach you new ways to beg.*

My knees weakened as I fanned my face. Suddenly, I was anxious to go to Abyssus. Who cared if Draevyn would be there? I would be too busy making love to my mates.

* * *

After I dressed the girls and combed their hair, I quickly dressed myself, pulling my hair back with one of the old ribbons. Not that I expected it to stay in place while we flew through the air. Today I'd be flying with Blaze. I couldn't wait to soar in his arms. I'd never felt freer than when I flew with my fire mages, but now that we were bonded, I sensed this would feel like a new kind of freedom. Now my heart was joined to theirs, it felt somehow free, too. Free to love and laugh and finally trust my body and soul to men who wouldn't hurt me. I couldn't wipe the smile from my face if I tried. My mates. My bonded mates. I could scarcely believe it.

The moment we descended the stairs into the musty tavern, I sensed the shift in the air. I couldn't describe it, but the tension was palpable, leaving an acidic taste in my mouth. There were too many shifters crowding in the tavern at such an early hour. They should've been abed, nursing their hangovers, but as they all turned to face us, their chests bowed out, their claws unsheathed, I had no doubt things were about to get

ugly. Magic pulsed through my veins as I grabbed the girls' hands while warily eyeing the wolves.

"What's wrong, Auntie?" Aurora whispered.

"The shifters are angry," I whispered back, squeezing my nieces' hands tighter.

Be on your guard, Blaze projected to me through thought before pushing us protectively behind him, smoke leaching from his fingertips.

Several shifters backed away, but it was still a long way to the low-lying door, and there were a lot more of them than us.

Nikkos walked behind us, snarling at shifters as they closed in around us. Magic flooded into my chest, thrumming like a drum.

The crowd up ahead parted, and Helena and her two frightening grandsons blocked the exit. Even more terrifying were the dozens of glowing eyes peering into the tavern's low windows.

Ember and Aurora wrapped their arms around my waist, trembling against me.

"Do we go to a safe place?" Aurora asked me.

"Not yet," I answered. "I'll tell you." I thought about asking Aurora to teleport all of us out of here, but I didn't know if she could transport that many people. She'd only ever teleported her sister and me.

Leaning on her cane, Helena focused on me. "You're leaving already?" She flashed a tight smile.

Don't show them fear, Blaze projected to me.

"Yes," I said, turning up my chin. "We must get an early start if we're to make it to my mates' estate by evening."

"Thank you for your hospitality," Blaze added, then his eyes hardened. "Now please let us pass."

Helena and her goons didn't budge as the other wolves closed in around us. It felt as if the shifters had sucked the last of the air out of the room as I struggled to draw breath.

Helena banged her cane on the floor, focusing on me with that one good eye. “It was our pleasure to house and feed Finnian and Asher’s children.” Her mouth flattened into a grim line. “Their safety is of utmost importance to us.”

“It’s ours as well,” Blaze said, and Nikkos and I agreed.

Do not show fear. Do not show fear.

“Tell us something, Shirina Avias,” Helena continued, her scowl deepening.

I swallowed back a lump of panic. “Yes?”

“We thought your sister died two years ago.” She gave me an accusatory look. “This morning rumors reached us that a white witch has been spotted in Cyrene.”

Behind me, a chorus of growls rose up like a wave and several howls echoed outside.

They’ll know if you’re lying, Blaze warned me.

“I’ve heard the same,” I confessed, refusing to avert my gaze, though I feared I’d melt beneath her piercing glare.

Her scowl deepened. “Is it her?”

“I believe so.” I nodded toward my mates. “They saw her. She looks different, but as you probably know, my mother has skin shifting magic.”

“And yet now you take her children to Malvolia’s lands.” Her eyes shifted to two golden, feral slits. “Why?”

It was then I knew these shifters weren’t letting us walk out of this compound with the girls, which meant I’d have to use my siren voice on all of them, the shifters in this tavern and the growing throng gathering outside. My chest and throat felt heavy with magic. I averted my gaze for a heartbeat, long enough for the old wolf to know I was hiding something. “It’s a long story.”

Her lips pinched and her nostrils flared. “One we’d be interested in hearing.”

“My parents used a mind spinner to erase my sister’s memories,” I confessed, the words tripping off my tongue like

they were racing for the exit. “They lied to me and told me she’d been killed by a bear.”

Helena frowned. “That was the story we’d heard, that she’d been mauled by a bear.”

“When I found out my parents were going to change our memories, too, I escaped with my nieces.” I swallowed back bile as the wall of shifters closed tighter around us, looking like creatures of nightmares with their long maws extended. “That’s when I found my fated mates.”

Blaze and Nikkos pushed the wolves back with their smoke, but I knew they wouldn’t be able to hold them back forever.

Helena arched a thin, white brow. “And now you go to Delfi?”

I shared a nervous look with my mates.

“Do you think that’s wise when Malvolia could use them as her pawns to get to your sister and your parents?”

I pulled back my shoulders. “I won’t let her.”

Helena laughed. “And you think you’re powerful enough to stop her?”

I gritted my teeth. “I love them as if they were my own children. I will protect them with my life.

“And we will, too,” Nikkos and Blaze answered in unison.

“Or you could leave them here with us,” Helena said, her voice a gravelly wolf’s growl, “with their own kind.”

The girls buried their faces against my hips.

Poisonous rage leached into my veins. “My twin’s children are *my* kind, too.”

She shook her head, clucking her tongue. “You won’t be able to handle them when they go through the change. Shifter-kind need to be raised by shifters.”

The other shifters growled their agreement.

“Tari entrusted them with me,” I spoke through clenched teeth, my heated glare sweeping the room, “and they’re staying with me.”

“Shirina.” Helena heaved a deep groan. “I know you love them, which is why I’m sorry that we have to do this.”

The wolves advanced. My mates’ flame erupted. Blaze moved so fast, his wings were just a blur as he spun a circle of fire around us. The children screamed. Enraged wolf howls rent the air.

I threw out my hands. “STOP!” My siren voice pulsed around me, fanning out like ripples in a pond.

And the world went still.

My mates’ flames extinguished. The wolves stopped in place, frozen like demonic statues, their claws raking the air, drool dripping off their fangs. Even the girls stopped their trembling. The yellow eyes in the windows stopped blinking.

My knees weakened, and I almost lost control of my bladder. Never had my voice ever been so powerful, not even the night the mountain men had tried to overtake me. I pressed my fingers into my nieces’ arms, my siren voice coming out on a soothing whisper. “Ember, Aurora, Blaze, and Nikkos, you are released from my spell.”

The girls gasped, blinking up at me. Blaze and Nikkos spun toward me, their eyes wide with disbelief.

I lifted Ember into my arms when her eyes began to water. “It’s okay, baby.”

I kissed her forehead. “Let’s go,” I whispered to my mates.

Blaze pushed open the door, and Nikkos picked up Aurora. We walked out into the void, a town full of frozen shifters, blinking at us while stuck in strange positions.

“Holy elements, Shiri,” Nikkos whispered at my back. “You just immobilized an entire town of shifters.”

A strange sense of fear and awe numbed my legs, and I had to work hard just to put one foot in front of the other. “I know.”

“Think of what you could do to an entire army,” he continued. “You could stop a war with Fachnan before it even starts.”

I shook my head. “Let’s just focus on getting out of here.”

“This isn’t a safe place anymore, is it, Auntie?” Aurora asked me.

I turned to her while pressing her sister’s tear-soaked face to my bosom. “No, Aurora. It’s not.”

* * *

Draevyn Inferni, Lord of Abyssus

After finalizing the evacuation of the nearby town, ensuring the local villagers filed into the stronghold in an orderly fashion, I flew up to the battlements, the midmorning sun barely a blot in the sky of gray. Fear and dread set my flame on edge as I landed on the stone wall and squinted through the haze at the Periculian forest that bordered my estate. The wilds. That’s what other nobility had called Abyssus, Delfi’s southernmost stronghold. It was why other nobility rarely visited, why even Malvolia’s own army had been reluctant to come here that fateful night twenty-four years ago. I had always thought their fears exaggerated, but now I finally understood.

Every soldier in my aerial army was on top of the battlements. They were so quiet, tension lines straining their bloodshot eyes, I could’ve heard a feather drop. Though as fire mages we were used to smoke, it was so thick even on top of the battlements, we had to cover our mouths with cloths just to breathe. I spotted three more infernos in the distance, billowing smoke and ash. What in elements’ name were they doing?

I walked across the battlements, greeting my grim-faced soldiers and inspecting the weaponry, even as I kept one eye on the foggy forest. The trees here weren’t as thick and tall as the ones that bordered the Windhaven side, but I had believed the dense forest to be magnificent. Not now when compared to the army of trolls that had easily knocked down centuries-old

pinces, using entire trees, long roots and all, to build their fires. They were just sitting around the fire, their dull eyes slowly blinking up at the sky. I counted over two dozen of them, but that was just one campfire.

And why had my ancestors ever thought Abyssus's stone walls and the moat surrounding it were strong enough to withstand a troll invasion? A few of the creatures were nearly the height of the tallest turret, with fists as big as boulders. They were so much bigger than any living creature I'd ever seen. Even Radnor, the mighty dragon, looked like a small dog compared to the giants. The occasional giants we'd seen at the edge of our forest had never been that big.

Every flier in my aerial army was at the ready, ballistae loaded with tallow dipped spears as wide as my chest. Those they couldn't strike by flaming spears, they would get with cannon fire, and then vats of sizzling oil. And those who passed through all their defenses, I was prepared to fight them myself. My army was, too. I would not let the giants win. How I wished my brothers were here, and not just for their support. I feared what would happen to them, what would happen to Shirina and the girls, when they were not within the protection of the battlement walls. What a fool I'd been to leave them. I'd let my rage cloud my judgment, turn away not just my brothers but my fated mate. And for what? For a tragedy that had happened before she'd been born. She was just as much a victim in all this as my family.

I checked each ballista before finding Romulus, the captain of my aerial guard, an older Fae who'd served my father and grandfather before him, one of the few older Ravini mages to have survived the war that had claimed my parents' lives. I was never sure of his age. My best guess was between two and three hundred, which was late middle age for a Fae. He couldn't have been older than four hundred, for I would've remembered him mentioning the goddess Maiadra, the last known white witch before the birth of Shirina's sister. His hair and wings had been a stunning silver ever since I could remember, though it was rumored the coloring came from his Sidhe Fae roots.

The wind shifted direction, and fortunately most of the smoke drifted away.

“Any movement?” I asked as I pocketed my cloth.

“No, My Lord.” Romulus shoved his cloth into the pocket of his fighting leathers, grimacing. “They’re still unmoving.”

“How many?” I asked.

“At least five dozen,” he answered, his eyes hardening.

Holy elements. This wasn’t an ordinary gathering of giants. This was an army. I swallowed back my fear and self-doubt, knowing I put my people at risk by not alerting Malvolia. But what would happen to Shirina if our queen sent her army? I dragged my hands through my hair, expelling a shaky breath. “Have you ever seen that many before?”

His silvery-blue eyes darkened to a deep shade of cobalt. “Not in all my three hundred years.”

Ahh. Three centuries. “Why do you think they’re here?”

“If I were to guess, I’d say it has something to do with the white witch that was spotted in Cyrene.”

I grimaced at the mention of Shirina’s sister. “We’re a long way from Cyrene.”

“I know.” He rubbed his beard, the silvery strands iridescent in the pale sunlight. “It’s my best guess. The giants haven’t gathered in such numbers since they fought alongside Maiadra in the demon wars many centuries ago.”

I repressed a shudder. Something had awakened these giants, and I feared Romulus was right. They’d come because of the white witch, which meant they could fight alongside her if the prophecy was true and she went to war against Malvolia. I scanned the hazy skies. “Any sign of my brothers?”

“No, My Lord.”

“Keep a look out. I want the aerial army ready to assist them if the giants try to shoot them down.” Why had I left them?

He arched a brow. “Should we send them now?”

“No. Their presence will alert the giants. My brothers should be able to smell the danger and fly out of range.” At least I prayed they would.

“And you’re sure you don’t want to send word to Thebes?”

“No. The queen can’t spare any mages,” I lied. “Her forces are already stretched thin pursuing the white witch.”

I caught the gleam of doubt in his eyes when he bowed curtly. “Yes, My Lord.”

He knew I was lying. If I sent word to our country’s capital, Malvolia would send her army to help us. But I worried what they’d do if they found Shirina more than I feared the giants, which meant I had become what I’d most loathed—a traitor. I put my mate’s safety above all others, even my loyalty to the queen. And yet, I felt no guilt, only peace that I’d finally accepted what I’d so adamantly fought against. I prayed Shirina would find a way to forgive me.

Rage of Her Ravens

Part Two
By Tara West
Revelations, Omens, and
Apparitions

Chapter Eleven

Shirina

After flying nearly all day, Blaze and Nikkos found renewed energy, soaring even faster as we passed familiar landmarks, the last being two adjacent rounded mountain tops that they had lovingly referred to as “Twin Diddies.” Thankfully, they hadn’t said it out loud. They were finally learning to watch their language around the girls.

The girls had become so excited, Nikkos had to land twice to gently reprimand them and readjust the sling. I was so grateful to both my mates for their patience with the girls and thanked the elements their brother wasn’t with us to scold them and berate me for not properly disciplining them. The poor darlings. Though they weren’t fire mages themselves, they certainly had their pappo’s fire in their blood and hated sitting still for overly long. I was surprised they’d lasted this long.

The sun was starting to set, streaking the sky in crimson ribbons, brilliant prisms of light cutting through the clouds. Smiling, I turned my face toward the heavens, letting the last of the light warm my frozen face while filling my lungs with crisp, cool spring air. I’d never felt more alive than when flying in my mates’ arms, the rapid thrumming of their wings matching the wild pounding of my heart. I could soar with them forever.

The sky changed the closer we flew to Abyssus, and I smelled smoke and tasted ash on my tongue. Blaze frowned as the scatterings of ash on the wind began to multiply and the smoke grew thicker.

A forest fire? I asked him through thought.

He grimaced. *It must be.*

Dread slowed my veins with sludge. *Do you think Abyssus is okay?*

There's a thick moat around our walls. There was no mistaking the pride in his voice when he spoke of his home. The fire won't breach Abyssus. We should fly above the clouds, just in case. Would you tell Nikkos?

Of course, I answered. One downfall of Blaze and Nikkos not being twins was that they couldn't mind-speak, so they used me as a go-between. I had hoped that we could all mind-speak after the bonding, but that didn't seem to be the case. I had already asked them to try drinking each other's blood, and from the looks of disgust they gave me, one would've thought I'd asked them to jump in a pile of troll dung.

Nikkos, I called out to my other mate through thought. Blaze wants us to fly above the clouds.

On it, he answered, his wings flapping harder as he shot upward.

I clutched Blaze's neck, trying not to panic when we were engulfed in a sea of pale mist.

Once we broke through the clouds, I released the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. It was much cooler this high up, but the air smelled even fresher. "Oh, it's much better up here."

Good, Blaze answered through thought, tenderly kissing my forehead. We wouldn't want the smoke burning our girls' eyes.

'Our girls.' How thoughtful he was to refer to the twins as his. He was getting extra love tonight. I rested my head against his warm chest. Thank you for thinking of us.

You're all I think about now, Shiri. I can't think of anything other than getting you alone in my bedchamber tonight.

Oh. Flames fanned my skin, and that spot between my legs pulsed with desire. Biting my bottom lip, I batted my lashes. What will you do to me in your bedchamber?

Eyes wickedly gleaming, he dug his fingers into my thighs. So many naughty things.

My mouth fell open, and for a moment, there was only Blaze and I, two lovers floating through the heavens, though I knew the real heaven would be found in his bed.

“Look there!” Nikkos called to us as he nodded to something in the distance. The clouds below parted just enough to reveal what looked like the tip of an arrow shooting up through the thick smoke. “It’s a turret!”

Blaze let out a holler. “Abyssus!”

I gasped. “You live in a castle?”

He slanted a grin. “A small one.”

I snorted at that. Was there such a thing as a small castle? I only hoped it wasn’t big enough that the girls would get lost.

Nikkos hooted and hollered. “We’re home!”

“Tarts, tarts, tarts!” the girls squealed, the echoes of their voices sounding strangely hollow.

And what happened next caught me by such surprise, I had no time to react. One moment, Nikkos and the girls were smiling and laughing while soaring through the sky. The next, a giant net struck them, their screams instantly muted as they were sucked back through the clouds.

“Nooo!” Panic coursed through my veins and shattered my heart.

“Hold on!”

My stomach hit my throat when Blaze dove upside down, falling through the sky like an arrow. We broke through the clouds, chasing after an empty net. Where had they gone? For the briefest of moments, all time stopped as we spiraled through the air, the smoke clearing enough to reveal dozens of giant hands that tried to snatch us from the sky.

Blaze pulled back with a curse, flying just out of reach of their grimy fingers and big, blinking eyes.

Holy elements! Trolls. A battle cry rang out, a line of fire flashed in the distance, and an army of winged mages soared toward us.

I frantically searched the ground for any sign of Nikkos and the girls. Where were they? I prayed Aurora had teleported them out of danger, but I wouldn't know for sure until I subdued the trolls. If I could subdue them. But, no, I had no choice. If not, these giants would crush us.

Scorching magic pulsed through my veins. I sucked in a breath and released my rage. "All trolls, on your knees! Do not move!" I was barely aware of my voice echoing around us like the boom of rolling thunder.

The giants fell down, and the stagnant air shook as if a monstrous tremor had split open the earth.

Blaze quickly descended, stumbling when he hit the ground. His wings caught us in time, and he gently set me down. I looked behind us at the empty net sprawled out on the rocky incline that had tripped him. The giants were still on their knees, and they were covering their ears, their monstrous faces scrunched in pain as if the sound of my voice had injured them. There were so many of them, and they stunk like week-old fish guts. One in particular had a monstrous, misshapen head, made even uglier by the way his features crossed as he covered his ears and made a strange bleating sound like a dying cow.

"Nikkos! Ember! Aurora!" I cried out, spinning a quick circle, panic and disbelief projecting bile into my throat when I saw nothing but giant creatures and rows of flattened trees. *Nikkos!* I called to him through thought, but he didn't answer.

Draevyn and an army of at least twenty fire mages landed beside us.

The stricken look in Draevyn's eyes, which were still slightly bruised, caught me off guard. He shook a fist at the closest giant. "Where are they?"

The giant blinked down at him like a cat studying a bug.

I looked at the giant. He held an empty net that looked similar to the one they'd thrown at Nikkos. "You there," I commanded, my siren voice flowing out of me like a raging

river. “Tell me what happened to the Ravini and children you shot down.”

“Gorin don’t know.” He frowned down at me while keeping his hands over his ears. “They gone.”

My heart beat so loudly in my ears, I could scarcely hear myself think. They disappeared. Aurora took them to safety. I didn’t know if I wanted to laugh or cry.

I swallowed back my fear while glaring up at the giant. “Is that your name? Gorin?”

He nodded. “Da.”

“Gorin,” I pressed, “did you see them disappear?”

“Da.”

“They’re lying!” Draevyn roared, his flames arcing off his shaking hands. “They didn’t just disappear.”

“They did.” I looked from Draevyn to Blaze. “They’re at the last cave we slept in, and if that’s not safe, they are in the one before that.”

Blaze gave me a quizzical look. “How?”

I was very aware of the giants staring down at us like sentient statues, their rancid breath and smoke from the fires fogging the air. My throat constricted, making it hard to push out the words. “Because I told Aurora to teleport there if they were in danger.”

He gaped at me. “She can teleport?”

I nodded.

I couldn’t tell if the look in Draevyn’s eyes was one of censure or curiosity. “And she took her sister and our brother with her?”

Tears sprang to my eyes, as I heaved a sigh of relief. “She did.”

Blaze threw up his hands. “Holy elements!”

“I’ll send an aerial unit to meet them,” Draevyn said to us.

Blaze's wings snapped open. "No. Let me go. I'm the fastest flier."

Draevyn grasped his brother's shoulder, no sign of the animosity from before. "You're right. Go, brother."

I latched onto Blaze's hand. "Take me with you."

Draevyn shook his head. "It will slow him down if he has to carry you."

I shot him a glare.

"I'm sorry. He's right." Blaze squeezed my hand, the look of pity in his eyes making my gut roil.

I clasped his face, desperately searching his eyes. "Bring them home to me, and you come back to me, too."

"I will, my love." He kissed me, not tenderly or sweetly, but desperately, as if he wished to imprint the memory of my lips on his.

I threw my arms around him, moaning into his mouth, then crying out in protest when he broke the kiss too soon.

"Do I have your word you will take care of Shiri?" he rumbled while cupping the back of my head. It took me a moment to realize he was speaking to his brother. "That you will guard her with your life against *all* threats?"

"I will. You have my word."

Eyes narrowing, I looked over my shoulder at Draevyn. Would he truly guard me with his life, or was he only trying to appease Blaze? His cheeks were flushed crimson, his eyes reflecting what appeared to have been longing. But, no. I had to have been imagining it. For the briefest of moments, I thought I felt the pull between us, the mating bond. I gritted my teeth, pressing against Blaze. I had the only mates I needed. Even if Draevyn had changed his mind, it didn't mean I would.

"Shirina." Draevyn held a hand out to me. "We should go."

I clung to Blaze, shaking my head.

"Shiri." I gasped when Blaze pulled away from me.

“Wait,” I said as the monsters continued to look down at us, their blinking eyes reminding me of curious children. “Trolls!” My siren’s call echoed around us. “Why are you here?”

The one named Gorin cleared his throat. “We sent to serve the white witch.”

They were sent? Who sent them? Not that it mattered. They were a long way from my sister. “You will not find her. She has gone on to Fallax.”

“Na.” The troll pointed at me. “She is there.”

I looked behind me to see if he was pointing to someone else. Had he mistaken me for my twin? Either way, if they thought I was her, I could use this to my advantage. “Heed my words, trolls,” I commanded, my siren voice ricocheting around us. “You will leave this place and not bother the Ravini again. You will return to wherever you came from, and you will wait. If the white witch needs you, she will summon you. Do you understand?”

“Da,” they all said simultaneously while stumbling to their feet.

“Good.” I pointed to the forest behind us. “Now go!”

Blaze swore and grabbed me before shooting into the sky like a backward bolt of lightning. I had no idea he could fly so fast. We cleared the giants’ heads as they walked past us, their heavy stomps rattling the air around us like claps of thunder. I looked down to see Draevyn and the other winged mages barely clearing the massive monsters’ heads.

Blaze flew me toward the castle walls, moving so fast, everything passed in a blur.

“How?” I asked once we reached a long wall on top of the castle looking down at the flattened trees and the river below that surrounded the fortress.

“I’ve always been able to fly fast.” He slanted a smile. “A blessing from the elements.” He nodded toward his brother and his aerial army who flew toward us. “How else do you think I was able to bust up his face without getting a scratch?”

I pressed a hand to his warm chest, wishing he didn't have to leave me, but comforted in the fact that he'd find the girls and Nikkos soon. "There's much we need to learn about each other."

"And we will." He pressed his lips to my forehead, murmuring against my skin, "When I return."

He jumped into the air and blew me a kiss. I caught and returned it, and then I swore my heart imploded when he turned his back to me and flew in the opposite direction.

Draevyn and the rest of his aerial army landed on the wall beside me. When Draevyn opened his mouth as if to speak, I turned from him while doing my best to fight back my tears. My heart was utterly shattered without Aurora and Ember safely in my arms, and I knew it wouldn't heal until they were returned to me, and my mates were safe with me, too.

When Draevyn cleared his throat, I took a chance and looked over my shoulder, ignoring his piercing eyes while searching the darkening sky for Blaze.

"Nobody flies as fast as my brother," Draevyn said, a note of pride in his voice. "He will return with them soon."

Wrapping my arms around myself, I silently nodded while keeping my gaze on that disappearing speck in the sky. He looked as small as a bird as he flew further and further away, taking my hopes and heart with him.

* * *

Ember Lykaios

Ember sat up with a gasp, then slid off Uncle Nikkos. She looked down at her sister who laid against their uncle's bare chest, her eyes closed. Nikkos's black wings were flattened beneath him on the ground like a blanket. His eyes were closed, too, and he had a bloody bump on his head. What had happened? One moment they were flying, and the next she heard a snap and a thump, and they were falling through the clouds. Had Rora brought them here?

It was getting dark outside. Too dark. It looked like they were in that bone cave they had slept in that time Uncle Blaze

got into a fight with Draevyn.

Three dark figures hovered beside them, their spirits blinking in and out, their expressions grim. *It isn't safe here*, they told her. *You have to go*.

Aurora let out a groan and slowly sat up, rubbing her eyes. "What happened?"

Ember squinted at her sister in the dim light. "You took us here, Rora," she said accusingly. "I don't like it here. It's too dark."

Rora's mouth fell open as she looked around the cave. "I don't know where else to go."

A bone-chilling howl resounded in the distance, and Ember grasped Aurora's hand while trembling with fright. "Take us somewhere else."

Aurora grasped Nikkos's shoulder and took Ember's hand, then held her breath as if she was diving under water.

Ember screamed as they fell through space and time like they were tumbling off a cliff. They hit the ground with a hard *thud* and Ember scrambled off Nikkos again while looking around the small yard of their home.

"You brought us here?" She gave her sister an accusatory look. "What if Pappo and Yaya take our memories?"

Aurora scooted off Nikkos's chest and stood, dusting debris off her stockings. "Nobody is here." She waved toward the henhouse. "Look."

Ember squinted in the darkness and noticed the henhouse door was open and there were no more hens. She spun a slow circle. The pigs weren't in their pen and Wolfy wasn't on the porch.

"Where's Wolfy?"

"He's gone," Rora said. "All the animals are gone."

Why? What had happened to them? Did this mean Pappo and Yaya were gone, too? Ember looked for her friends and saw three shadows at the edge of the forest. Why wouldn't

they come closer? She didn't like it here anymore. It didn't feel safe. She went to Uncle Nikkos and knelt beside him. He was still sleeping. "Uncle Nikkos," she said, shaking his shoulder. "Wake up."

Ember didn't like the way the animals in the trees blinked down at them, their wide eyes watching, waiting. She shook their uncle again, but he refused to wake. She tried lifting him up, but he was too heavy. She heaved a frustrated groan. "Take us in the house," she said to her sister. "He's too heavy to lift."

Aurora grabbed them, and they tumbled from the yard into the loft bed they shared. Nikkos's wings took up the entire bed, his feathers draped off the side like a curtain.

She grabbed Aurora's hand and together they pushed aside Nikkos's wings and slid down the ladder.

It was so dark inside that they had to fumble around for a lantern. If Ember's friends hadn't been blinking in and out beside the lantern on the top shelf, she never would have found it. She climbed on top of the table and grabbed it off the shelf, handing it to her sister. Then she climbed down and asked her friends what to do. They showed her the dying embers in the fire. Their Yaya and Auntie had told them never to light lanterns by themselves, but Ember and Aurora weren't alone. They had help from Ember's friends. She used Yaya's big wooden spoon to scoop up a few sparks from the fire and lit the wick, producing a soft glowing light, smiling to herself that she'd figured it out, just like a big girl.

Her tummy growled, and she looked around the kitchen. "I'm hungry."

"I'll make you some porridge," Aurora said, taking the lead and stirring the cooking kettle above the fire. "We're in luck! It's already got porridge inside," she said with a smile.

Ember scowled at her sister's backside. Why did her sister take them here? Why didn't she take them to the top of their uncles' castle? She crossed her arms with a pout. "I want tarts."

“Stop being a baby, Em.” Rora rolled her eyes as she pumped water into a jug and poured it into the kettle. She nodded toward the table. “Sit down.”

Ember sat on a wobbly bench and rested her head on her arms. There were barely any sparks in the hearth. How was Rora supposed to cook porridge? She missed Auntie. She didn't want to be here when her auntie and Blaze were probably at the castle eating tarts without them.

Nikkos groaned, his wings shifting, but he didn't come down the ladder. He just laid there. Was he sick? Ember nervously twisted the hem of her dress, thinking more and more they should bring Uncle Nikkos to their auntie, not play at their scary old house. As soon as Rora finished making the porridge, she would tell her they needed to go.

* * *

Shirina

A cool wind blew my hair back from my face and sent a chill cascading down my spine. My bones were sore, my throat was raw, and my eyes burned from the tears I desperately fought back.

Behind me, Draevyn cleared his throat. “You must be famished. Would you like to come inside? I can have Cook prepare you some food.”

Spine stiffening, I refused to turn around. I swiped hot tears from my eyes. “I want to watch the skies.”

Soldiers flew around me, their nervous gazes darting to me as they landed on the castle wall taking orders from an older silver-winged Fae.

Silence stretched between us, and I didn't care. He could stare holes through the back of my skull all night. All that mattered was having my nieces and my mates back with me.

He stepped up beside me, his gaze turned to the forest, the tips of his feathers tickling my arm. He let out a low whistle. “They've flattened so many trees. It will take years for our forest to recover, but I'm glad they're finally gone.”

Was he expecting me to converse with him? In no mood to talk, I took a wide step away from him and wrapped my arms around myself. How long would it take for Blaze to find them? Hours? Days?

“You have their scent on you.” He chewed on his lip while continuing to stare into the forest. “Are you bonded?”

I stiffened at the question. Why was he asking when it wasn't any of his business? He'd already made it clear he didn't want to mate with me. I worked hard to unclench my teeth. “We are,” I finally answered, refusing to look at him.

“Congratulations.”

I cut him a sideways glare. “You don't mean it.”

“I do.” He pressed a hand to his heart and bowed ever so slightly. “I'm happy for you and my brothers.”

I snorted at that. He was happy for no one.

“My brothers are better Fae than I. They deserve to be happy. So do you.”

I forced myself to look away from his piercing gaze. Was he sincere? Or was he only being kind because I sent the giants away from his land and he finally respected my power? I didn't know how to answer him, so I simply stared at the sky while wondering if he had some ulterior motive.

He cleared his throat. “I meant what I said, Shirina.”

Was this his version of an apology? If so, why didn't he just come out and apologize? Or was he too proud to admit he'd been behaving like a spoiled dragon's ass?

Spine stiffening, I continued to stare at the sky. “I won't be happy until the girls are back in my arms.”

“They will be. My brothers won't rest until they are. Neither will I.” He bridged the distance between us, reaching for my hand.

I jerked back as if he had the plague. Did he truly think I could just forget his behavior these past few days and let him

comfort me? Or maybe he was looking to soothe himself, and I was his only option.

He grappled the air, his eyes flashing with pain, then quickly tucked his hands in his pockets. “If you want, I’ll have the servants put you in my mother’s bedchamber.” His smile appeared plastered to his face. “It has a wide terrace with a beautiful view of the southwestern skies.”

“Alright,” I finally relented, refusing to take his arm when he offered it.

I followed him down a set of stone stairs, keeping a wide enough gap between us, though his blasted feathers continued to tickle my arm. Ugh. Why did the elements have to stick me with him? I tried not to be awed as he brought me through a set of double doors, the wind from the open doorway at my back billowing my skirts until we walked into what I could only describe as an atrium, a tall winding marble staircase that descended into a hall with a towering glass ceiling. Wooden rafters crisscrossed several feet below the top of a ceiling, and I was reminded of a large bird cage, a Ravini cage. This giant atrium was meant for flying. Ha. Small castle. If Blaze thought this was small, the big castles must’ve been meant for giants. My parents’ entire cottage could fit on one of the many stairway landings.

My knees weak from either fear or fatigue, I held onto the banister as we descended, mindful that Draevyn was watching me. When he stopped to offer his arm, I refused. It was bad enough I was stuck in his castle. I wouldn’t be forced into the role of the helpless female relying on him to save me. When we reached another landing, Draevyn guided me down a long hall, his hand on my lower back and his wingtips grazing my arm. I walked faster, trying to escape his touch, but it was no use. He had longer legs and wings propelling him. Once my mates returned, I would insist we find someplace else to stay. I prayed they would hurry. I didn’t know how long I could withstand being in such close proximity to Draevyn without my mates acting as a buffer.

Chapter Twelve

Aurora Lykaios

Aurora didn't understand why the porridge was sticking to the pot. She'd done everything she'd watched Yaya do—added water and stirred it until it bubbled. It didn't bubble this time, but it was steaming, and she'd stirred it for a long, long time. She scooped what she could into two wooden bowls and set the bowls on the table. Then she sat on the bench opposite her sister.

Ember scowled at her food. When she lifted her spoon, the entire contents of the bowl stuck to it in one big lump. "It's too hard."

Aurora tried eating her porridge and the same thing happened. It was like a big leg of lamb, only it wasn't. She frowned at the mess and then bit a piece off the spoon. It was a little chewy, but it was better than going hungry. "Just eat it, Em."

Ember threw down her spoon with a pout. "I don't like it here anymore. Can't you take us to our uncles' home? You saw the top of their castle."

The spoon made a loud *clank* when Aurora dropped it in the bowl. "That's all I saw." How could she take them back to a turret? At least, she thought that's what Uncle Nikkos had called it.

Ember pushed her bowl to the other side of the table. "Then take us to there."

She shook her head. "What if we fall off?" It was just the poky top part of a castle, like the tip of an arrow. How were they supposed to get down? Or what if they got stuck on it?

"Uncle Blaze will fly up and get us," Ember said.

Aurora motioned toward their loft bed where Uncle Nikkos still slept. He was probably very tired after flying so far. "Let's wait until Uncle Nikkos wakes up. He'll tell us where to go."

Ember's eyes watered with tears. "But I'm hungry."

Oh no. Aurora hated when her sister cried. She jumped from the table and went to her sister. "Maybe there are eggs in the henhouse."

Ember scooted to the other end of the bench. "I don't want to go outside at night."

"We'll go together." She grabbed the lantern and walked to the end of the bench, holding out her hand. "Take my hand."

Ember slipped her hand in hers and together they went outside. As Aurora heaved the door shut behind them, she was keenly aware of every blinking eye looking down at them from the trees. Though her wolf-touched eyes could see well at night, she hadn't remembered it being so dark here before.

They went to the henhouse and looked for eggs, but there were none. Where had everyone gone and why did they take the hens?

Aurora! Ember's cry resounded in her head. She looked at her sister, whose eyes were nearly popping out of her head as she continued to speak through thought. *My friends said the bad man is here!*

Aurora gasped when the henhouse door creaked open and a tall, bony man with a gray beard peeked inside. "Who's there?" he asked in a feeble old voice, then smiled when he looked down at them.

Ember squeezed her hand while trembling beside her. *It's the bad man who takes memories!*

He doesn't look like a bad man to me, Aurora answered. But what if he was bad? She panicked, not knowing what to do as she blinked up at the man, too afraid to move.

"Where is your grandmother?" he asked them. "And why is there a sleeping fire mage in the loft?"

"Who are you?" Ember blurted.

"You probably don't remember, but I'm a friend of your grandmother's." His smile widened. "I'm Thorin."

Ember squeezed her hand again. *Get us out of here! Take us to Nikkos!*

Aurora quickly transported them to the loft bed. She accidentally dropped the lantern off the side of the bed, and it hit the floor with a crash.

“Uncle Nikkos, wake up!” Ember cried, shaking Nikkos’s shoulders. “The bad man is here.”

But Uncle Nikkos didn’t move. He just groaned and turned his head. Aurora couldn’t make out his features very well in the dark, but she worried something was wrong with him.

Her nostrils flared when their small cabin began to fill with smoke.

Ember grabbed Aurora’s shoulders, tears filling her eyes. “Take us to the castle!”

“Please wake.” Aurora tried shaking Nikkos. She was so afraid of falling off that pointy turret. “The bad man is here. He’s going to take our memories!”

Uncle Nikkos still didn’t stir.

The door handle rattled, and the old man called from outside, “Girls! Your house is on fire!”

“Rora!” Ember screamed. “Do it!”

Aurora grabbed Nikkos and her sister and sucked in a breath before envisioning that pointy turret and hoping they didn’t get stuck or worse.

* * *

Shirina

Draevyn brought me through a pretty sitting area to another room several times bigger than my parents’ modest hut, lit with a beautiful hanging chandelier, wall sconces, and a warm hearth. So many candles. I couldn’t imagine how they could’ve afforded such luxury. As I followed Draevyn across a plush plum carpet that cradled my feet like a cloud, I blinked up at the towering ceiling with more wide rafters. I imagined my mates flying from rafter to rafter, their powerful wings

carrying them throughout the house in a matter of seconds. In the center of the room was the hugest, softest feather bed I'd ever seen with smooth, lavender-colored silk sheets that could easily accommodate my two mates and me. I couldn't wait to share it with them. But first, they had to make it back to me.

A set of wide double glass doors draped in gossamer curtains led to an attached terrace that was like something from a dream. It had a large semi-circular balcony with marble rails, a wide swinging hammock, fragrant flowering pots, and a view of the Periculian Forest and mountain range behind it—sleeping shadows illuminated by a starry night sky. I would've been content to live out the remainder of my days on just the balcony.

Night had fallen, and the room was aglow with dozens of candles and lamps. Though I knew I should've been impressed, I was more worried about wasting tallow and wax to light so much of the room. I understood the significance that Draevyn had brought me here—to his mother's room. This was a peace offering, for I knew what his mother had meant to him.

After giving servants instructions, he'd left me here, saying he had to get back to the battlements. I was grateful for his absence, for the way he looked at me, like a dog salivating over a bone, made me uncomfortable.

The servants swarmed me like bees to a hive, a group of young women who looked part Fae, part human, all eager to serve me while calling me 'Your Highness' as if I hadn't lived my entire life in a moldy forest with patched dresses and stockings full of holes. How had they known about my royal lineage? Had Draevyn told them? And how long before word spread that Derrick and Flora's daughter was staying at Abyssus? How long before Malvolia was burning down the gates? The servants had fussed over my clothes, wanting to change me, to bathe me. I'd sent them all away. Couldn't they see I needed to be alone?

They'd gone in a flutter, leaving behind a table laden with steaming platters of food and tea that smelled and tasted heavenly. I partook of the tea, just to erase the grit from my

mouth. Indeed, the drink wasn't stale. It tasted like citrus and honey and awakened taste buds in my mouth I hadn't known existed. Oh, how the girls would've loved it. But I didn't touch the food. How could I eat when my stomach churned with worry?

After a few swallows of tea, I went to the balcony and sat on a padded lounge chair that leaned back, so I could stare up at the night sky. Hadn't my veins buzzed with nervous energy, I could've fallen asleep on such a comfortable chair. The stars were brighter and bigger at Abyssus, or maybe they seemed that way from high up in the castle. My borrowed bedchamber had to have been at least five stories up. I imagined Draevyn's mother had very fit legs, or else her mate had flown her everywhere. Over an hour passed, and still no sign of my mates or the girls. A cyclone twisted and turned in my stomach with each passing minute.

I stiffened when I heard the light ruffle of feathers in the doorway behind me.

"Shirina." Draevyn cleared his throat. "May I sit with you?"

I kept my gaze on the twinkling stars above. "What do you want?"

"I brought you some refreshments."

My nostrils flared, and I smelled all kinds of fragrant, sweet spices. I looked over my shoulder to see the servants were clearing away the untouched trays of food, replacing them with new trays.

"I'm not hungry." A lie. I was ravenous, but how could I eat while the children were gone? They were probably even more hungry, and Nikkos wouldn't be able to hunt for them while trying to keep them safe. I prayed he had a few more crusts of bread with him.

"How about some company?"

I wrapped my arms around myself, my spine tightening when Draevyn walked to my chair, blocking out my view of the sky. I refused to look at him. "I'd rather be alone."

He heaved an audible sigh. “Please, Shirina.”

I finally looked up at him. His wings hung limply at his sides, and worry lines framed his eyes and mouth.

I had no idea why I relented. I didn’t want his company, and he certainly didn’t deserve mine.

He motioned toward a servant who rolled in a cart with wheels. This one had steaming tea and several pretty cakes and cookies with colorful icing. “Cook made a special tea that will help calm you.”

I fought back tears that threatened to spill over my eyes. “I don’t want to be calm. I don’t want to rest until they’re safe in my arms.”

“Then how about some food?” His voice rose and cracked, reminding me of myself when I would beg the children to behave. “The servants told me you didn’t touch your supper. You need to keep up your strength.”

I shook my head. “How can I eat when they’re not here with me?”

I flinched when he knelt beside me and took my hand. “Nikkos will protect them.”

I looked down at his calloused hand encircling mine as if it was a foreign parasite.

He rubbed warmth into my hand. “You’re chilled.”

A zing went through me at the feel of his heated skin on mine, desire awakened, making my thighs quake with need. I jerked my hand away as if I’d been scalded and swung my legs over the other side of the chair. Why was he touching me? Did he think I’d forget the horrible way he’d treated me?

Wrapping my arms around myself, I crossed to the other side of the balcony, needing to put as much distance between us as possible while being ashamed of the way my body had reacted to his touch. I cringed when I heard his feathers ruffling behind me. Was he deliberately torturing me?

I stiffened when he draped a blanket over my shoulders. I wrapped the blanket tightly around me, using it as a shield

from the warmth radiating off him.

“Is that better?” he murmured, his breath tickling my ear.

I spun around, snarling like a wounded animal. Was the bastard trying to seduce me at a time like this?

He stepped back, his eyes widening. “Forgive me, Shirina. I was only thinking of your comfort.”

“I don’t want comfort,” I snapped, throwing the blanket off me. “I want them!”

A look of pain flashed in his eyes before he plastered on a smile. “I know. The blanket was only meant to keep you warm until my brothers return.”

I shook my head, swiping hot tears from my eyes. “Blaze should’ve found them by now.”

“He probably has. Blaze can fly supernaturally fast.” He took a hesitant step toward me. “My brothers will do whatever it takes to keep the girls safe.”

I swallowed back my emotions, trying to speak through a constricted throat. “I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to them.”

His voice dropped to a soothing whisper as he stepped closer. “You’re a good aunt.”

I snorted at that while taking a big step back. “If I was a good aunt, they’d be here with me.”

“They will be.” Draevyn’s wings snapped open, his hands clenching and unclenching by his sides. “Shirina, I need to tell you something.”

My veins solidified to sludge. He was going to apologize, ask me to forgive him, and I wasn’t ready to think of anything beyond having the girls safe in my arms. And even then, I didn’t think I could, not after all he’d said and done. Why was he doing this now when I already had the weight of the world bearing down on my shoulders?

A loud *thunk* echoed somewhere above us, followed by two distinct, shrill screams. I practically flew up the walls

while scanning the skies. “The girls!”

Draevyn jumped from the balcony, disappearing into the night sky like a shadow swathed in ink. I clutched a hand to my pounding heart, my head spinning with panic. What was happening?

* * *

Draevyn

Wings furiously pumping, I shot into the air, following the sounds of the girls’ screams. I flew in the direction of the highest turret towering above the battlements. Two of my aerial guards landed on the turret just before me in what could only be described as utter chaos. The girls were kicking and screaming while my men tried to pull them off Nikkos.

I landed hard on the turret, tiles sliding beneath my feet, and grabbed a girl from one of my men. “Calm down,” I soothed the child. “I’ve got you.”

Tears flowed down her grimy cheeks as she reached for her sister. I grabbed the other child and held them against my chest. They trembled in my arms like feathers in a windstorm.

“It’s okay,” I reassured them again. “You’re safe. I’ll bring you to your auntie.”

That seemed to calm them as they blinked up at me like frightened baby birds.

One of my men cried out, and my attention was drawn to Nikkos, who was completely unresponsive. My heart rate slowed and then took off at a race when I noticed Nikkos’s wings were bent and the side of his head was crusted with blood.

“Get my brother and follow me!” I called to the guards. I was barely aware of my actions as I soared back toward Shirina.

The girls were squirming to be released before I landed. They slipped out of my arms the moment I hit the tile floor and ran to their aunt. My heart caught in my throat when

Shirina let out a strangled sob and collapsed onto the floor, holding the children to her chest.

I spun around when my men landed behind me. Nikkos was limp in their arms, and I feared my brother might be dead.

“Carry him to the bed,” I said to my men, my legs feeling like they were leaden weights as I followed them through the double doors. Why wasn’t Nikkos moving?

Nikkos let out a soft moan when they laid him on the bed, and I finally released the breath I’d been holding. I examined the wound on the side of Nikkos’s skull. It was deep, too deep. Part of his skull had been caved in, no doubt caused by the giants when they’d struck him with the weighted net. I feared the injury would be too severe for the local healers. I would have to send for the green witch in the next largest city, an entire day’s flight away.

“Fetch the castle nurses,” I said to my men. We had no green witches here, other than Nikkos, and he couldn’t very well heal himself.

“Yes, My Lord.” They both bowed and disappeared through the balcony doors.

The bed dipped beside me. “Is he okay?”

I turned to Shirina. She still held the girls in her lap, her brow creased with worry.

I swallowed back my fear, forcing out the words. “He will be. I’ll send for the best healer.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me.” Shame flushed my face. “He’s my brother.” What else did she expect me to do? Leave him to die? I must’ve truly been a monster in her eyes.

Shirina pushed the hair out of the children’s eyes. “Where were you?”

I felt like an outsider as I watched Shirina’s tender display of affection for her nieces. She loved them as if she was their own mother, had sacrificed so much to keep them safe, and

more shame flushed my skin at the horrible way I'd treated all of them when they needed my compassion the most.

"We went to Pappo and Yaya's house," the girl with the shorter hair answered. I should've remembered which was Ember and Aurora, but, no, I'd been so preoccupied with my own misery that I hadn't paid much attention to the children.

"What?" Shirina gasped. "Why didn't you go to the cave?"

"We did, but it was too scary there, and we were hungry," the girl with the longer hair answered as she grabbed a pillow off the bed, clutching it to her chest. I realized she no longer had her ugly straw doll. She must've lost it. I would make it a point to replace it with a much better doll.

"Nobody was there," the other child said. "Not even the chickens and the dogs."

The other girl nodded, her eyes wide with fright. "And then the bad man came."

"Who?" Shirina asked, the fear in her voice palpable.

"Thorin!" both girls cried in unison.

Fire raced through my veins. The mind spinner. The one who Derrick and Flora had called to steal my mate's memories.

"Oh, girls." Shirina hugged them both to her chest, kissing their foreheads. "Did he say anything to you?"

I suddenly remembered Ember had the longer hair. She was the more shy of the two who always clutched her doll. Aurora had the shorter hair. She was the one with teleporting abilities. How could I have forgotten?

"He asked about Yaya," Ember said while wiping her nose with the back of her hand, smearing grime and snot across her face.

Shirina slid the girls onto the bed and quickly strode to the nearby table. She grabbed a cloth and dipped it in a pitcher of water, using it to wipe the girls' faces like a tender and devoted mother. My chest warmed while thinking of her

nurturing her own children, my brothers' children, and if I could be so lucky, mine, too.

“What did you tell him?” she asked, frowning while she picked grime out of their hair.

“We didn't tell him anything.” Aurora shivered, wrapping her thin arms around herself. “He scared me, and I dropped the lamp.”

Shirina's mouth fell open. “You lit a lamp?” she asked the girls as she draped a throw blanket around Aurora's shoulders.

Aurora hung her head. “It was dark.”

“The house was smoking,” Ember said, “so we came here.”

Shirina knelt in front of the children, grasping their hands. “I don't care about the house. I'm just glad you're okay.” She stood and hugged them again, tears streaming down her face. “I was so worried about you!”

“You're squishing me, Auntie!” Aurora cried.

But Shirina didn't let go. If anything, she clutched them harder. Her love for them stirred something in me, perhaps a memory, perhaps a longing, for my mother used to hold me like that. These children didn't realize how lucky they were to have Shirina. And now the queen I served wanted to kill the girls' own mother. How was I supposed to serve Malvolia now?

I got up from the bed and crossed to the other side of the room when I heard a knock on the door. I ushered in two nurses, younger women of mostly human descent with dark hair tied back in simple braids and wearing clean, white aprons. I motioned toward their patient on the bed.

“He was struck in the head,” I murmured. “Tend to his wound and keep him comfortable while I send for a green witch.”

They both curtsied. “Yes, My Lord.”

“I'm hungry,” Ember whined, squirming in her aunt's arms. “Aurora's porridge was hard.”

“Uncle Nikkos said we get tarts,” Aurora said with a grunt while struggling out of her aunt’s embrace.

Shirina finally released them.

“And tea that isn’t stale,” Ember added.

Stale tea? What kind of childhood had these children been forced to endure? And Shirina had probably never known comforts, living far below her station in squalor. All that would change now they were at Abyssus. I remembered the shack they had called their home and was honestly surprised they’d had tea at all.

“The servants brought some food.” Shirina motioned toward the table with the small repast the servants had prepared just for her.

Aurora scratched the back of her head. “Are there tarts?”

I cleared my throat. “That isn’t enough food.” I nodded toward the door. “Let’s go down to the dining hall. We’ll get you filling meals.”

Ember looked curiously at me. “And sweets?”

“For being such brave girls,” I said with a smile, “I’m sure Cook can find some sweets.”

Shirina stood, nervously toying with her fingers. “What about Blaze?”

I swallowed at that. Blaze was probably all the way to the first cave by now. “I’ll send more mages after him.”

She bowed her head. “Thank you.”

I stiffened. “Of course.” Again, she felt she had to thank me for taking care of my brothers. I had no doubt she considered me the worst sort of monster, not that I blamed her after my poor behavior.

She turned a forlorn gaze to Nikkos. “He’s not answering my thoughts.”

Her thoughts? Of course, they were bonded and could mind-speak. I tried to ignore the thorns of jealousy that

pricked my spine. It served me right for the way I'd treated her.

“We must give him time to heal.”

She shook her head, stepping back when I reached for her hand. “I should stay with him.”

“He will be in good hands, Shirina.” I did my best to infuse confidence in my voice. “After we feed the girls, you can return here to him.”

The girls tugged on their aunt's skirts. “Please, Auntie,” they begged. “We're so hungry.”

Shirina's shoulders fell, and she finally relented, following me out of the room, but not before giving Nikkos one last forlorn look. I only hoped she'd one day look at me with half the love reflecting in her eyes.

Chapter Thirteen

Shirina

Draevyn led us down a rounded staircase with golden rails and draped in a plush velvet runner. I was still amazed at the opulence. I kept scanning the dome ceiling overhead, that was several stories in height, imagining my mates soaring from rafter to rafter when they were children learning to fly. Toward the bottom of the atrium was another set of rafters crisscrossing in the shape of a star. Hanging from it was the biggest chandelier I'd ever seen with hundreds of softly glowing candles illuminating the marble floors below. The tall windows surrounding us reflected the twinkling stars outside.

The girls had been rendered speechless, their mouths hanging open as they took in the sights. We reached a landing of colorful padded carpets and followed Draevyn through double doors into a massive hall with a long dining table that could've served two dozen guests. The chandelier above the table was almost as big as the one above the stairwell.

Draevyn surged ahead of us, speaking in a low voice to a young man wearing silk stockings and a crimson tunic. The young man whistled to a team of servants. They all rushed to his side and then got to work setting four placemats at the far end of the table.

I swallowed back a lump of nerves when Draevyn pulled out a chair next to the head of the table with a smile. The girls clung to me when two servants pulled out the chairs opposite mine.

"I would prefer they sat by me," I said to Draevyn.

"Of course," he said, nodding toward the servants, who quickly rearranged the plates.

Aurora was seated next to Draevyn at the head, and I sat between her and Ember. Poor little Aurora leaned away from Draevyn, looking at him as if he was a leviathan about to bite off her head. He folded his hands in front of him, his heavy

wings draped over the back of the chair, and he smiled down at the girls as if he'd never scorned them.

I mumbled my thanks when servants poured Draevyn and me glasses of wine and then poured orange liquid in smaller goblets for the girls. They gulped down their drinks, moaning into their cups.

“This is the sweetest tea I've ever tasted!” Aurora exclaimed.

“It's not tea,” Draevyn corrected, smiling behind his goblet. “It's juice, made from fruit.”

Aurora just gaped at him, then shot me a worried look. I didn't have to be a mind reader to know she was still afraid of him and probably wondering why he was speaking to her.

I stroked the back of her head. “It's okay, sweetheart,” I whispered. “Drink your juice.”

She nodded, finishing off the rest of her goblet.

Draevyn motioned toward the girls, and a servant refilled their goblets. I would've told them to wait for their supper, but realized they were probably thirsty after their ordeal, so I simply smiled, stroking their heads while they drank.

I slowly sipped my wine. It was mildly sweet and fruity and more delicious than anything I'd ever tasted. I resisted the urge to follow my nieces' lead and gulp it down.

When the servants brought out baskets of warm rolls and steaming bowls of soup, my nieces smiled nearly ear to ear, hunger reflecting in their eyes. I buttered their rolls for them and tested the soup. It was still too hot, so I instructed them to blow on their spoons. They chose instead to dunk their rolls in the broth, moaning while stuffing the bread into their faces.

“Slow down before you choke,” I warned as they dripped broth from the bread onto their dresses, but it was no use. They were determined to eat like little piglets at the trough.

Draevyn laughed, and I shot him a glare, crushing a roll in my grip.

He shrugged an apology and slanted a grin that was part feral Ravini and part smug lord. “They’ll learn better table manners in time.”

I eyed him through slits. Better in time? Wasn’t this the same dragon’s ass who’d said my nieces were wild, and I didn’t know how to discipline them? Now he wasn’t bothered by their bad table manners? Why the sudden change of heart? I doubted he’d come to his senses after two days without me, which meant he had another reason for being so nice.

A man came out wearing an odd white cap and a stained white apron. I blinked at the fur on his face and his strange ears that twisted and turned like a fawn’s. Then my gaze was drawn to his two bent legs and what looked like deer hooves sticking out from the bottom of his trousers.

Satyr, instinct told me, for he looked just as my father had described.

He smiled at the girls and me and bowed before Draevyn. “Supper will be served momentarily, My Lord.”

“Thank you, Cook,” Draevyn said as he waved a roll in my direction. “I’d like to introduce you to Princess Shirina Avias and her nieces, the princesses Ember and Aurora.”

I froze at the mention of our titles. Was Draevyn intentionally putting targets on our backs?

The satyr bowed toward us. “Your Highnesses.”

“Cook’s family has been with my family for generations,” Draevyn said with an easy smile.

“Crispin Otto Orvyn Kloopenhoof, at your service,” the satyr continued in a friendly manner as he looked at me, “but you may call me Cook.”

I tilted my chin, offering him a warm smile. “What if I prefer to call you Crispin?”

He splayed a hand across his heart, his eyes gleaming with pride. “It would be my honor.”

Aurora wrinkled her nose at him. “Are you a shifter?”

He laughed. “No.”

Ember pointed at his face. “Why are you furry?”

“And why do you have hooves and funny ears?” Aurora asked.

“Girls!” I scolded, then mouthed an apology to Crispin.

He shrugged off their questions with a laugh. “Because that’s how the elements made me.”

“Pappo told me about you!” Aurora squealed. “You’re a fawn!”

He clucked his tongue. “We prefer to be called satyrs.”

Ember sat up straighter in her chair. “Pappo gets stale tea from the satyrs.”

Crispin arched a bushy brow, looking from the girls to me. “Stale tea?”

“It was free,” I answered, as if that explained everything.

“I see.” The look of pity in his eyes made me want to crawl under the table and never come out. “You’ll find no stale tea here.”

“Do you have tarts?” Aurora blurted.

He rubbed his short, fuzzy beard. “Not fresh tarts, but I will have some ready for breakfast tomorrow.”

Both girls made exasperated sounds, as if Crispin had just told them they were to go to bed without supper.

Ember’s lower lip hung down in an exaggerated pout as her eyes welled up with tears. “Uncle Nikkos said there’d be tarts.”

“Girls,” I soothed, rubbing their backs. “Tomorrow isn’t that far away.”

“Crispin,” Draevyn asked, “do you have any other desserts?”

The satyr eagerly nodded. “We have pudding and cakes.”

The girls squealed their delight.

“Very good,” Draevyn said. “Bring out what you have after supper, please.”

“Yes, My Lord.” Crispin quickly bowed and left the room.

After he left, I leaned toward Draevyn, speaking on a hushed whisper. “Is it wise to tell the staff who we are?”

Draevyn leaned back in his chair, folding his hands behind his head. “My staff are loyal to the Infernis. They won’t tell a soul you’re here.”

Either he was an overconfident fool or else he planned for us to get caught. That would explain his sudden change in heart. He knew Malvolia was coming for me.

I picked at my supper, too worried about our futures, about that deep cut on Nikkos’s head, to find much of an appetite, even though the food was cooked and seasoned to perfection. After Crispin brought in the desserts, I fussed over the girls, wiping icing from their mouths while they devoured their cakes.

Aurora looked up at me after finishing her cake, a smidge of blue icing on the tip of her nose. “We love it here.” She nodded toward her sister. “Can we stay here forever?”

“Long enough, until we find a new safe home,” I answered while cleaning her nose. “Lord Draevyn won’t want to host us forever.”

“I do want you to stay forever,” he blurted.

I eyed him from beneath my lashes, looking for any sign of deceit. I was sorely tempted to use my siren voice on him and demand the truth.

Aurora gasped. “Us, too?”

My heart did a backflip when he offered my nieces a warm smile. “*All* of you.”

“Can we stay, Auntie?” both girls simultaneously whined.

I tensed, fisting my hands in my lap. “We’ll see.”

“Shirina.” Draevyn visibly swallowed, and I nearly melted beneath the intensity of his gaze. “I meant what I said.”

That strange pull that I suspected to be the unfulfilled mating bond thrummed between us like my heart had floated out of my chest and entwined midair with his. I gritted my teeth, forcing that invisible tether to snap. It made no difference whether he was lying or sincere. Whether he'd somehow resurrected that shriveled up heart of his and had decided he could finally love me. He was too late. I refused to allow his heart to entwine with mine after all he'd done.

I abruptly stood, needing to get away from his piercing gaze. "Right now, we need to get you girls in the bathtub," I said to the children while refusing to look at Draevyn. "You smell like trolls." I pulled out their chairs and held my hands down to them. "Come, girls."

They took my hands, blinking at Draevyn as if he was a mongrel who'd wandered into our yard and they were still deciding if he was friendly enough to pet.

Draevyn stood, too, his wings ruffling behind him. "I'll send servants to prepare their bath and bring fresh clothes."

"Thank you," I answered curtly, refusing to look at him as I tugged the girls toward the stairs. My spine stiffened as I felt his gaze boring holes through my skull all the way back up the stairs. I didn't know what he was about, and I still didn't trust his motives. Whatever the cause for his sudden kindness, I wouldn't drop my guard around him. He'd already had his chance to win my heart. He would not get another.

* * *

Nikkos wasn't waking and he wasn't answering any of my mental pleas. I'd spent the better part of the past hour probing his mind for any signs of clarity, anything at all, but his mind was as barren as a dried lake bed. His breathing was so shallow, I could scarcely hear him. His pulse was weak, but I refused to believe he was slipping away. I forced myself to remain strong for the girls, plastering a smile to my face while trying not to lose my soul to the darkness. Had I found my fated mate only to lose him? One night of heaven in his arms would never be enough. How would I go on without my sweet Nikkos?

The girls and I took a bath together in the biggest washtub I'd ever seen, made from smooth ivory stone in an adjoining bath chamber beside a warm, crackling hearth. I washed my face several times to mask the tears, my depressing thoughts threatening to sweep me under while the girls giggled and splashed. I prayed Blaze would return to us soon, for I needed someone to help me shoulder this overwhelming burden of sorrow.

After we dried off, I brushed the girls' hair by the fire in our bedchamber, my gaze repeatedly drifting toward my motionless mate. I couldn't lose him. I tied our hair back in pretty, soft ribbons and we put on silky nightgowns. The fabric felt like water between my fingers.

Aurora rubbed the hem of her gown across her cheek. "I love it here," she said with a sigh.

"Me, too," Ember said. "I never want to leave."

Fighting back tears, I kissed their temples then tucked them in beside Nikkos, careful of his wings. I'd already kicked the nurses out of the room after they'd offered to give the children a sleeping potion. What was it with people wanting to drug my nieces? The nurses didn't seem to be doing any good, other than constantly trying to squeeze puss from Nikkos's wound rather than giving him a moment's peace. And the medicine they'd slathered on his wound smelled worse than the infection itself, like fermented eggs that had sat out too long in the sun.

I squeezed between my nieces while looking over Aurora's head at Nikkos, saddened to see him lying so still. After Aurora fell asleep, I'd scoot her over, so I could sleep next to him, if for no other reason than to hold him one last time in case he passed during the night. I bit my lip, fighting back tears at the thought.

Pulling the blankets to my chin, I blinked up at the shadows from the overhead chandelier moving across the canopy above our bed like twirling dancers in a waltz. For the first time I missed our cramped loft bed, which was probably now cinders and ash. I missed our small yard, our grumpy old

dog, the clucking hens, and even the smell of mildew that permeated the air. I missed my sister. Even though they'd deceived me, I missed my parents. I missed the way my mother sang to us before bed. I missed my father's strong, warm hugs and tender smile.

"Auntie, is Uncle Nikkos going to die?"

I looked over Aurora, her gaze flitting from my sleeping mate to me.

I wiped tears from my eyes, forcing out the answer. "No." It wasn't a lie. It *couldn't* be a lie. I wouldn't let him die.

She sat up, frowning down at his prone form. "How do you know?"

I breathed out a shaky breath, my throat so constricted it hurt to speak. "Because I won't let him."

She made a face while looking at him. "His head smells."

"I know," I said, sighing. "It's the medicine."

I shot up at a sharp rap on the door. I heard footsteps in the sitting room, and Draevyn came into my bedchamber without an invitation, his wings tucked tightly behind him, his wet hair tied back in a queue. "How is he?" he asked as he heaved a sack onto the dresser.

I swiped more tears from my eyes, angry with myself for appearing so vulnerable. "Still not waking."

"Give him time to heal." Draevyn approached the bed like I was a wounded, feral animal. Then again, maybe I was. "The nursery has comfortable beds," he continued, motioning toward the children. "I'm sure they'd be happy there, so you and Nikkos can have some privacy."

The girls snuggled closer to me as I leaned against the headboard and wrapped my arms protectively around them. "Thank you, but no," I answered tersely. "I want them here with me tonight."

He flashed a tight smile. "Of course."

I wondered his true motive for wanting to separate us, and I was once again tempted to use my siren voice to bade him tell the truth. He couldn't blame me if I did. He'd already given me plenty of reasons to mistrust him. I peered down at the girls' heavy-lidded eyes. If he would just leave, I could get them to fall asleep. Aurora rolled into me, using my stomach as her pillow. I gently rubbed her back, trying to coax her to sleep.

I tensed when Draevyn sat on the edge of the bed, his musky, woodsy smell teasing my senses. Lifting the bandage from Nikkos's head, he checked his wound, frowning. "The bleeding has stopped, but the swelling isn't going down."

Even though I'd only just met him, I couldn't imagine living without Nikkos. I have already lost so much. How could fate be so cruel as to take my mate away? "I know." I clutched my chest, straining for breath as my world darkened. "I hope the green witch arrives soon."

"My men know it's urgent," he said. "They will bring her back as soon as they can."

I swallowed at that, feeling like a wilting flower underneath his penetrating gaze. "Lord Draevyn, I have a question for you."

He heaved a sigh, giving me the same look my mother gave the children when they dirtied the hems of their dresses. "If you can't call me Drae, then at least call me Draevyn."

Chewing my bottom lip, I warily eyed him, looking for any signs of deception in his dark eyes. "Alright, Draevyn, how can you be sure your servants won't tell Malvolia her nieces are here?"

He dragged a hand through his wet hair. "I'm not sure you realize how isolated Abyssus is from the rest of Delfi, but even if my servants weren't loyal, they have no way to get word out without flying across another mountain range and thousands of miles of forest, and I'm aware of everyone who comes and goes from my estate."

"What about the men you sent for the green witch?"

“I sent two of my most trusted soldiers.” He looked from me back to his brother. “They won’t betray us.”

I still wasn’t convinced. I had to know my nieces and I were safe here. It was difficult to trust him when the people I should have trusted the most, my parents, deceived me. “My mother told me Malvolia has seers. Shouldn’t she already know we’re here?”

He shook his head. “Malvolia *had* seers. Most of her most powerful witches were killed during the great darkness.”

Interesting. “How?” I asked, then regretted the question, fearing he’d tell me my parents had something to do with it.

Shadows darkened his eyes. “The story is that Flora, Marius, and Derrick killed them all.”

Of course he’d say that. I refused to believe my parents were killers, no matter their deception. How could I reconcile my gentle parents with vicious killers? I swallowed back a lump of sorrow. “Do you believe it?”

The look of desperation and longing he gave me made me want to crawl beneath the covers and never come out. “I believe you, and if you say your parents aren’t killers, then that’s what I believe.”

Elements. How was I supposed to respond to that?

My nieces squirmed in my arms.

Aurora elbowed my side. “You’re hurting me, Auntie.”

I loosened my hold on the girls. I hadn’t realized I’d been squeezing too hard. It was all Draevyn’s fault for muddling my brain with his sudden change in mood and his alluring scent that made me want to melt into the sheets.

It took me a moment to find my voice. “Then who killed them?”

He frowned. “I don’t know.”

I eyed him a long moment, looking for any cracks in his features. “And she has no other way to see us?”

“Malvolia had a mystic mirror that had the power to reveal the future, but there’s a rumor it was shattered during the darkness.”

The darkness. I knew what he was referring to. My parents had called it “the madness,” the course over a few months that Malvolia had burned her nation down to find my pregnant mother and to kill her unborn children. “You never found out?”

He shook his head. “Malvolia guards her secrets. She likes her enemies to believe she still has the ability to see across time and space.”

I swallowed when we locked gazes, and the shadows lifted from his eyes, revealing the swirling fires beneath. Why was he looking at me like that? With such intensity?

It took me a moment to find my voice. “How did she know where to find Tari?”

He let out a bitter-sounding laugh. “Lots and lots of spies.”

“Is that what you were?” I wasn’t angry, just curious.

“My brothers and I were training to be spies when we spotted the white witch.”

I flinched when he referred to Tari as ‘the white witch’ as if refusing to acknowledge her name made her less of a real person. “You mean Tari,” I corrected, refusing to hide the venom in my tone. “My *sister*.”

Maybe it made the thought of killing her less cruel, to detach her from her true self, my sister and best friend, Ember and Aurora’s mother, a kind green witch who’d spent most of her days pining for her lost mates.

“Sorry.” His cheeks reddened. “It’s hard to think of her as anyone other than the witch who was prophesized to kill our queen. It’s what we’ve been told since we were children.”

I refused to go round with him on this again. How long would he continue to paint my sister as a killer while it was his queen who’d been hunting us since before we were born? The girls blinked up at him while sucking their thumbs. I’d thought

they were almost asleep, but their eyes were wide now. Damn. I'd had enough. I cleared my throat, intending to tell him to leave us alone.

"Have you and the girls had a chance to visit the nursery?" he asked before I could speak.

"No," I answered tersely, my shoulders stiffening. "I don't want to leave Nikkos."

"I understand." He slowly rose from the bed, nodding toward that sack he'd left on the dresser. "I've brought a few dolls from the nursery to keep the girls occupied."

The girls shot up, and I had to cover my ears when they squealed like stuck pigs. My gaze nervously shot to Nikkos, who didn't so much as twitch a muscle.

My heart caught in my throat when Draevyn went to the other side of the bed and the girls crawled over to him. He dumped the contents of the sack. Two pairs of identical twin dolls. The girls each snatched two dolls, squeezing them to their chests.

"Oh," Ember said, her eyes welling with tears as she cupped a doll's face, "they are prettier than I dreamed."

Aurora rocked the dolls in her arms. "I've wanted these my whole life!"

Her whole life. I didn't know if I wanted to laugh or cry.

I couldn't think of what to say to Draevyn as our gazes locked for one long heartbeat. Was this act of kindness part of his true nature, or just a nefarious plot to gain our trust?

"These are just a few," he said, his wings ruffling behind him. "There are many more in the nursery."

Ember gasped while rocking her dolls in her arms. "May we go to the nursery?"

"Perhaps tomorrow." I opened my arms to them, beckoning them to return to me. "You have enough dolls to play with for now."

Clutching their dolls, they crawled back toward me.

“What do you say?” I asked the girls.

They both swallowed, their nervous gazes flitting from Draevyn back to me.

“Go on,” I whispered. Even if Draevyn had nefarious intentions, I refused to let my nieces be ill-mannered.

“Thank you, Lord Draevyn,” they said in unison.

He sat on the edge of the bed, casually draping one leg over the other, though tension lines still framed his eyes and mouth. “You may call me Drae, if you like.”

Why was he being so kind? Was he trying to get to me through the girls? Maybe after smelling his brothers on me, he wanted sex, too. His efforts were futile. I wasn't about to give myself to him.

“Isn't she pretty, Auntie? Look at her fancy dress!” Ember held up her doll to me.

“Very pretty.” I touched the doll's smooth face. She had a warm complexion, rosy cheeks, dark hair in perfectly even ringlets, and the prettiest blue satin and lace gown.

“Tomorrow our seamstress will fit you all with new gowns and shoes,” Draevyn said to us.

He was being too kind. I stiffened when he smiled. “I'm not sure if I can get away from Nikkos.”

The girls shared hopeful looks.

“May I have a blue gown like new Bethamy?” Ember asked him.

He gave me a quizzical look. “New Bethamy?”

“One of the dolls,” I answered, motioning toward the dolls in Ember's arms. I wasn't sure which one was new Bethamy, but either one was a far improvement over old Bethamy.

“Uncle Blaze said we can keep all the dolls here,” Aurora said to Draevyn, a serious look in her eyes as if she was waiting for him to challenge her claim.

“Of course you can,” Draevyn said as he stood, his eyes crinkling as he smiled. “And we’ll get you any color gowns you like.”

The girls gasped. “Thank you!”

He tucked his wings behind him while stealing a glance in my direction. “You’re welcome.”

“How come you’re nice now?” Aurora asked him.

I sucked in a sharp breath, almost tempted to scold Aurora. Almost. It was a fair question; one I’d been too afraid to ask.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he rocked on his heels. “I suppose I’ve come to my senses.”

Aurora wagged a finger at him like my mother preparing to launch into a lecture. “You weren’t nice before.”

“I know.” He hung his head, his cheeks coloring. “I’m sorry.”

He couldn’t be serious. My heart pounded against my ribcage when he looked up at me from beneath thick lashes. Sorry? For what? For the way he treated the children and me or the fact that his brothers and I refused to tolerate his behavior?

Ember pressed her dolls to her chest, lovingly stroking their backs like I’d done many times with her and Aurora. She blinked up at him with glossy eyes. “Do we call you Uncle Drae now?”

“That’s enough questions, girls,” I blurted, patting the pillow beside me. “Time for sleep.” I gave Draevyn a sharp look. “If you would excuse us, Lord Draevyn.” I didn’t know if it had been a slip of the tongue when I’d called him by his formal title, and I didn’t care. Did he think he could just hand my nieces a few dolls and all would be forgiven?

Aurora and Ember laid back down on my other side, giving me space to curl up next to Nikkos. “Goodnight, Uncle Drae,” they said in unison before sucking on their thumbs.

Ohh, what little traitors.

“Goodnight,” Draevyn said, giving me one last lingering look.

Turning on my side, I punched my pillow into submission while refusing to look at Draevyn, only exhaling when I heard the audible click of the door. I hadn’t bothered to return his ‘goodnight,’ for I knew my night would be anything but good while I watched over my mate, praying that he’d wake and return to me.

* * *

Blaze

Chasing after ghosts. That’s what I felt like I was doing, for there were no signs of Nikkos and the girls anywhere. Ignoring the burning pain in my wings, I’d flown everywhere, from both caves to the lake and everything in-between, my supernatural speed carrying me thrice as fast as a normal Ravini. The only other place I hadn’t looked would be the shifter stronghold. Dread coursed through my veins at the thought of what the shifters would’ve done to Nikkos had they gone there. But, no, I remembered Shirina telling the girls the shifter stronghold was no longer safe. I prayed to the elements they’d listened. Just in case, though, I decided to circle close enough to the stronghold to see if I could scent them.

My wings felt weighted with stone as I flew in the direction of the shifter town. The morning sun was barely peeking over the horizon. With my magical speed, I might be able to fly in and out undetected, but my brother wouldn’t be able to escape as easily. With each flap of my wings, I began to reconsider my fool’s plan, knowing I should return home first. What if they’d somehow ended up there? Then I would’ve risked my life breaching the shifters’ walls for nothing.

Though every fiber in my body screamed at the thought of retreat, I knew I had no more options. I had to return to Abyssus, and if Nikkos and the girls weren’t there, we’d have no choice but to mobilize an aerial army to save them. During my long search, I had plenty of time to think about Shirina and my role in Malvolia’s army. I could no longer in good

conscience try to coerce our mate to join with the witch who'd been hunting her family. How could I expect Shirina to go to battle against her own sister, against Ember and Aurora's mother? Which meant I would be branded a traitor to the crown and Malvolia would soon hunt all of us. Would Shirina be able to defeat the sorceress queen with her siren's call? Or would we all be doomed to suffer the fate of my parents? And if Derrick and Flora didn't kill my parents, who did? Had Malvolia been so cruel as to treat my brothers and me as her own children after murdering our parents?

So consumed was I in my dark thoughts that I didn't notice the line of fire mages flying in my direction. For the first time in my life, my veins iced with panic at the sight of my own countrymen. What if they were Malvolia's personal mages coming after me? But then a shaft of morning light struck the mage at the lead, highlighting his silvery hair and wings. Romulus. The captain of the aerial guard. They were coming for me, but why? Had they found Nikkos and the girls? I flew faster than I'd ever flown in my life, ignoring the pain in my wings as I furiously flapped toward them.

Romulus let out a sharp whistle and I flew after them toward a narrow ridge along the base of the nearest mountain overlooking the valley of trees.

Once we landed, I bent over to catch my breath, the muscles in my wings burning from straining all night. "What news?" I finally asked, wiping sweat from my brow.

"Your brother and the children have returned to Abyssus," Romulus answered.

I threw back my head, letting out a joyous howl as a wave of relief washed over me. "Thank the elements!" A shudder coursed through me when I looked back at Romulus and saw the pity reflecting in his eyes. "Are they alright?"

Romulus gave me another look of pity before averting his gaze. "The children are well. Your brother is unconscious. There are nurses tending to him."

My world tipped then spun. Unconscious? I gritted my teeth. "Then let's go."

Despite the tenderness in my wings, I pushed off the ledge. Fatigue threatened to overwhelm me, but I didn't want to rest until I was back at Abyssus. I only prayed my brother would be alive when I got there.

Chapter Fourteen

Shirina

I woke to pale morning sunlight streaming through the sheer curtains into my room and painting the canopy above me in a myriad of brilliant colors. I turned onto my side, placing my palm across Nikkos's heart. It still beat, albeit not as strong as I would've liked. And he reeked of the foul medicine the nurses had put on his wound. The smell was so strong, it permeated everything—his skin, the sheets, the air.

Nikkos, I called to him through thought.

No answer.

Nikkos! I called again, imagining my voice ricocheting through his mind like a gong.

Still, nothing.

Nikkos, my love. I tried a soothing voice this time, infusing a bit of my siren's call. *It's me, Shirina, your mate. Please wake.*

I gasped when I thought I saw movement beneath his eyelids and his breathing became slightly erratic. His heart rate quickened, too. Was he hearing me?

I frowned when his heart rate slowed. What was wrong with him? That green witch couldn't come fast enough. If only Tari was with us. She'd heal him in a matter of minutes. After all, our father had said she'd brought back Prince Helian from the dead.

I turned over when I felt movement behind me. Aurora clutched both of her dolls to her chest while looking at me through sleepy eyes.

I brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "Good morning, darling. Sleep well?"

She slowly nodded. "Is Uncle Nikkos dead?"

I blinked back tears. "No, sweetheart." *Not yet*, I thought to myself, though I dared not voice it aloud.

Ember stretched beside her sister before sitting up, dropping her dolls in her lap and rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She motioned toward her dolls. “New Bethamy and Isabeau are hungry.”

Isabeau? Where had I heard that name before?

I slowly sat up, frowning down at Nikkos before turning toward the girls. “Then we’ll have to feed them.”

A rap on the door and then footsteps in the sitting room. Draevyn poked his head inside the bedchamber. “Morning, girls.” He flashed a cheery smile. “Sleep well?”

The girls mumbled something unintelligible.

Hugging my knees to my chest, I declined to answer. How could he expect me to have a good sleep while my mate was literally dying beside me? A team of servants pushing carts and carrying fresh clothes and linens followed Draevyn into the room. It was then I realized I wouldn’t be able to expect privacy. Not that I’d ever had a shred of privacy in my life.

Draevyn went straight to his brother, checking his wound. The gash on his head looked worse as smelly puss oozed from it.

The two nurses from earlier began cleaning the wound with water. When one of them began squeezing the puss onto a cloth, both girls made spluttering sounds.

“Eww!” Aurora exclaimed.

“Come on,” I said to her, climbing down from the bed and taking the girls with me. I thanked the servants who helped the girls and me slip into robes. They led us to a table by the hearth. It was already laden with several steaming platters. Everything smelled heavenly, but how did they expect me to eat at a time like this?

To my surprise, and aggravation, Draevyn sat with us at the table, as if we were a family...as if he was my mate.

He poured tea for the girls and me. “Cream and sugar?” he asked us.

The girls squealed in delight. “Lots of cream and sugar!” they said in unison.

I frowned at the big bowl of sugar. “One spoon for each of us,” I said, cutting the girls a stern look.

They pouted but didn’t argue.

I thanked him when he added cream and sugar to my tea. Then I drummed my nails on the edge of the saucer. “I’m worried he’s still not waking.”

He nodded while scooping ham and eggs onto our plates. “The healer should be here by tonight, tomorrow at the latest.”

I pushed the food around on my plate. “Tomorrow is a long time.”

“He has skilled nurses with him until then.”

The servants propped open the double glass doors leading to the balcony, and I took a deep breath of fresh, morning air. “Have you heard anything from Blaze?” I asked on an exhale.

“No, it’s too soon,” he said while slathering butter and jam on two big crusts of bread. “He’s smart and wickedly fast. I’m sure he’s safe.”

The girls thanked him with broad smiles when he handed them each a piece of bread.

My stomach churned with worry while he handed me a crust of bread with butter and jam and then scooped colorful fruit onto our plates. How did he expect us to eat all this food while his brother lay dying in my bed?

“I thought you might like a tour of the gardens after breakfast,” he said to us.

The girls looked up from their food, giving me hopeful looks.

I frowned, shaking my head. “Eat your food, girls.”

They went back to eating, shoveling food so fast into their mouths, that half of it fell onto their laps or the floor.

A wave of dizziness washed over me, and I realized I needed to eat to keep up my strength. I stabbed a piece of egg with my fork, then let out a deep exhale, forcing myself to eat.

“The fresh air would do you and the girls some good,” Draevyn added.

“We should probably stay with Nikkos,” I said as I absently chewed my food. I barely remembered the fragrant spices, the freshness of the eggs that tasted far better than anything from my parents’ poor, thin hens.

Draevyn motioned to the two nurses who were smearing a thick paste over Nikkos’s wound. “He has two nurses taking very good care of him.”

“Can we play there?” Aurora asked him.

“Of course,” he said, his eyes lighting up with memories. “My brothers and I played in the gardens almost every day when we were growing up.” He visibly swallowed while looking forlornly at Nikkos. He turned back toward us with a smile, though his eyes shone with worry. “There’s still a big swing hanging from the tree.”

“Ohh!” Ember bounced around in her seat, causing her dolls to clunk to the floor. She gasped and crawled beneath the table to retrieve them.

“May we go there, Auntie?” Aurora pleaded, batting her thick lashes and giving me the most pitiful smile.

I cast one more forlorn gaze at Nikkos. The nurses were giving him a gentle sponge bath. Perhaps I could give them a little time to take care of their patient without us staring at them. “Yes, for a short while,” I finally relented, “if that’s what you want.”

“It is! It is!” Aurora bounced around in her seat, accidentally dropping her dolls onto the floor. Or maybe it wasn’t an accident. She crawled beneath the table with Ember, both girls giggling and taking way too long to retrieve their dolls.

I heaved a sigh of resignation. I had no strength left in me to discipline them, and if Draevyn didn’t like it, too bad.

Draevyn pulled back the tablecloth and peered under the table. “Too bad you don’t seem hungry. Cook made tarts for good girls who finish their breakfast.”

Dolls forgotten, they both clamored back into their seats and ate their breakfast with amazing enthusiasm.

I shot Draevyn a look, surprised to see no censure reflecting back at me. He shot me a wink while taking a long sip of tea.

I shifted in my seat, an uncomfortable ache squeezing my chest. I wasn’t used to this Draevyn. I didn’t know how to respond when he wasn’t being a dragon’s ass. His flirtations while his brother was unconscious felt like a betrayal. I didn’t want to be sitting here with him. I didn’t want to go into the gardens. All I wanted was to crawl into Nikkos’s arms and beg him to wake.

* * *

Draevyn

I never loathed myself more than in this moment as I paced in front of Shirina’s bedchamber, listening to her scold the girls while trying to get them to stand still for their hair brushing. She didn’t want to go to the garden with me, and I didn’t blame her. She wanted to stay with Nikkos, and I was wedging myself between them.

But what else was I to do? His nurses had told me Shirina had prevented them from treating his wound. I wouldn’t dare scold my fated mate when we were already on shaky ground. My only option was to distract her with a garden tour while the nurses did their job. I knew how critical it was that they kept the wound clear of infection. Shirina probably thought I was a selfish ass for pulling her away from him.

Besides, maybe part of my motive was a selfish one. I had thought I could use this time to demonstrate that I knew how to be kind, that I cared about her and the children, and maybe apologize again if she’d let me. But I’d been a fool to think Shirina would feel anything but resentment and anger toward me. I’d lost my chance to mate with her, perhaps even severed

the bond for good. I hadn't realized then this widening chasm in my chest would multiply tenfold at the thought of not only losing her, but at losing my baby brother. Still, I would plaster on a smile and force myself to appear strong. I couldn't succumb to the darkness, at least, not in front of them. I could tell Shirina was already a fraction away from falling apart. I wouldn't add to her misery.

* * *

Shirina

I caught my reflection in the mirror just before we prepared to leave the bedchamber. The servants had found me a pretty gown of deep green that brought out the moss coloring in my eyes. Green wasn't my color, though. My sister had always preferred green to match her magic. I'd always felt more like a crimson witch. The color of flame like the fire in my veins that burned for my mates. Ember and Aurora wore pale blue and yellow dresses with lots of lace and ruffles to match the gowns on their dolls. They paraded and twirled so much in their new clothes they were starting to make my head spin. But they were happy that they had pretty dresses that didn't itch their legs, and that's all that mattered.

The girls had it in their heads that the garden would have lots of sweet berries, so after the servants had found them matching baskets, we were ready to go. I checked on Nikkos one last time, his watchful nurses standing behind me. I sensed they wanted me to go so they could squeeze out more puss and apply more stinky medicine without me driving them away.

Fighting back tears, I pressed a gentle kiss to his lips as he laid as still as a corpse upon the bed. *Please wake, my love*, I projected to him through thought, my heart sinking like a stone when he did not answer. It felt as if my voice was echoing in a canyon whenever I tried to send him a mental message.

After heaving a heart-sick sigh, I grabbed my nieces' hands, and we followed Draevyn down two flights of stairs and out a set of double doors onto what appeared to have been a hill pressed up against the castle, or maybe the castle had been built into the hill. Shielding my eyes, I squinted into the

morning sunlight, feeling like a ghoul who'd just awakened from a crypt. Why was it so bright?

A mild breeze blew my hair off my shoulders and tickled the nape of my neck. The morning was warm enough that the girls didn't need cloaks and cool enough that I was glad they wore thick stockings. I immediately retreated beneath the shade of a tree with low, flowering branches, my nieces following me like my little shadows. It was then I caught the smell of fragrant flowers. So sweet, like mint, lavender, and honey. Why hadn't I noticed the strong scents before? Maybe because I'd been so absorbed in my depressing thoughts about Nikkos. His head smelled so much worse this morning, and I was starting to fear it wasn't the medicine at all, but the smell of infection and decay. Even outside in this fragrant garden I could still smell it clinging to my skin and clothes and deep inside my nostrils. I feared that stench would haunt me for eternity.

Aurora picked up a white flower petal off the ground, pressing it to her nose. "Mm! The flowers smell so sweet!"

"They do," Draevyn said, smiling widely, his wings tucked behind him. "This was my mother's prized garden."

I stole a sideways glance at my mates' brother. He looked very much the Lord of the Manor, or perhaps a courtier at the queen's court, wearing a deep blue tunic with silver trim, matching leggings, and black shoes that reminded me of the ink in his wings or in his dark hair that was tied neatly back in a queue. I couldn't deny he was a handsome Fae with those piercing eyes and broad shoulders, and I was certain ladies and lords would fall at his feet at court, if they hadn't already. The thought was like a rush of venom in my blood, though I shouldn't have cared who loved him when I certainly never would.

"Ohh! Look at all the pretty flowers on the ground!" Aurora said eagerly as she and her sister began collecting petals and putting them in their baskets.

I could feel the weight of Draevyn's stare on me while I followed the girls, so rather than acknowledge him, I looked

out into the garden. I wondered how long it would take the girls to accidentally fall into the small pond in the center of the garden with the colorful fish. Or how long before they tried to climb into one of the three stone fountains shooting water into the air.

Luckily, they were focused on the flowers—for now. Aurora handed me a limp white flower, and I inhaled its honey-sweet fragrance, a welcome change to that putrid medicine.

“The Sortis are the most fragrant,” Draevyn said as he sidled up to me, that cautious look in his eyes as if he was cornering a wild animal. “They are known to have amorous effects when brewed.”

Turning my back on him, I decided it best not to respond to his flirtations as I discarded the flower. My nieces had already found the swing hanging from a thick oak branch and were fighting over who got to sit on it first.

I reached them in a few long strides. “Girls, you must share or no swing at all,” I scolded.

“Fine,” Aurora relented, letting her sister take the swing.

“Will you push us, Auntie?” Ember asked, her little legs dangling in the air.

I tensed, turning at the sound of Draevyn’s wings ruffling behind me.

“Why don’t you girls take turns pushing each other while your auntie and I rest in the shade?” He motioned toward a nearby tree. A blanket was spread out beneath it with a tray of drinks, fruit, and cheese.

I gritted my teeth, repressing a curse. I didn’t want fruit and cheese. I didn’t even want to be in this cursed garden. I wanted to be with Nikkos.

Ember pouted. “Okay.”

I have no idea why I let Draevyn lead me to the blanket. Maybe I was running from his familiar touch as his hand

rested on the small of my back. I swore I could feel the burn from the flames in his blood.

“Are you comfortable?” he asked as I sat down on the blanket.

I turned up my nose, watching the girls while refusing to look at him. “I’m fine, thanks.”

He sat much too close to me, his wingtips tickling my arm. “You were magnificent yesterday.”

I pulled my arm into my lap, angling away from him. “I did what needed to be done.”

“You disabled an army of giants,” he said, a note of awe in his voice. “I’ve never seen a witch with your powers.”

I snorted at that. “Wait until you meet my sister.”

He leaned back on his palms, his magnificent wings spread behind him like black sails. “You’re more powerful than her.”

I glared at him. Did he truly think I’d be moved by false flattery? “She’s a white witch.”

He visibly swallowed, the look of adoration in his eyes making my skin prickle with unease. “Shirina, when you disabled the giants, I saw white magic encircling them.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes. He had to be lying. “I’m not a white witch.”

“I think you are. I heard you in my head.”

I blinked at him. “What?”

“Your siren voice.” He sat up and tapped the side of his head. “It projected into my head, even after I covered my ears. We are familiar with some of the trolls that inhabit the border. The bigger one with the misshapen head, he’s deaf. All the trolls fell to their knees when you commanded them, including the deaf troll.”

“He could’ve been following the others,” I protested, though my voice lacked inflection. What if Draevyn was right? I remembered the troll with the misshapen head and the look of agony on his face as he shielded his ears.

“He was crying out and covering his ears.” He leaned toward me, the intensity in his eyes nearly stealing the breath from my lungs. “You projected your voice into his mind. Shirina, your mouth wasn’t moving, but I still heard you.”

I clutched my throat. “It wasn’t moving?”

“You don’t remember?”

“No. I was overcome by my magic.” Fear rang in my words. “What if Tari wasn’t meant to kill Malvolia? What if it’s me?”

His features hardened, and I feared I’d given Draevyn a reason to kill me.

“You aren’t,” he answered, a brittle edge to his words.

“How do you know?” Or was he simply in denial?

He leaned closer to me, so close my heart began to pound wildly, drowning out all other sounds. I was mesmerized by the warmth radiating off him and the tenderness in his eyes as he gently cupped my chin. “You wouldn’t do anything to hurt your mates, just like we won’t kill your parents...or your sister.”

I swallowed back a knot that had formed in my throat. “Thank you.” Why was I thanking him for not killing my sister, an innocent mother who was being controlled like a puppet on a string by others in power? And how could I so easily fall under his mesmerizing spell after all he’d done?

“You don’t need to thank me. You’re my fated mate, and I’m sorry for my behavior.” My lashes involuntarily fluttered when he dragged his knuckles down the side of my face. I couldn’t deny his touch felt nice, and for a moment, I pretended he wasn’t Draevyn, but Nikkos, awake and well and ready to stand by my side, even with the threat of his queen looming over us.

And when I felt his heat encompass me, his wings gently wrap around my shoulders, my eyes flew open, and I stared into his eyes, swirling with desire as his lips hovered dangerously close to mine. I shoved away from him and jumped to my feet with surprising alacrity.

“What behavior?” I asked while pacing the grass beside the blanket. “Your cruelty toward me after I stopped you from killing my parents?” I leveled him with an accusatory glare. “Maybe when you threatened to drop me? When you called me a liar? Or when you abandoned us in a forest infested with giants?”

He stumbled to his feet, his wings drooping behind him. “All of it.”

“I have to be honest with you, Draevyn.” Wrapping my arms around myself, I stared at the girls as they pushed each other on the swing. “I’m not sure I can forgive you. I was heartbroken over my parent’s betrayal, forced to flee with mages I didn’t know while worrying over the safety of my nieces.” I clutched my aching chest, feeling as if he’d struck it open with a mallet, exposing every layer of my insecurities, and I was once again that feared and mistrusted child whose parents watched, waiting for her to turn evil. “The last thing I needed was your scorn.”

“What can I do to show you how sorry I am?” He stepped toward me, his hands reaching for something that I feared would always be out of reach.

I took a big step back. “I honestly don’t think it matters.” My shoulders fell with the admission. “The damage has already been done, Draevyn.”

His jaw dropped, and he looked as if I’d plunged a dagger through his heart.

Of all the moments for that stupid bond to rear its ugly head. It pulsed between us like a racing heartbeat, tempting me to let him sweep me into his arms and fly me to the heavens. But, no. He didn’t deserve my heart. He’d had the chance to hold it once, and he’d thrown it away. Our bond didn’t seem to care as it thrummed harder and harder. Even though we stood across from each other, so near yet so far, a chasm of sorrow was wedged between us. I stood dangerously close to the precipice of that chasm. I had to get away before I fell in and drowned.

“Auntie!” Aurora called, her legs violently swinging back and forth while she jerked around on the swing. “Em isn’t pushing me high enough.”

I refused to spare him another glance as I turned away. “I’m coming, girls.”

That bond between us stretched thinner as I walked away, but it refused to break, reminding me that my heart would never be rid of him, no matter how hard I tried.

Chapter Fifteen

Nikkos's wound smelled worse, and I was now convinced it was the infection, for his skin was feverish, more so than usual for a fire mage. I didn't understand why he wasn't showing any signs of healing when Fae were known for their ability to recover quickly from injuries. The nurses cleaned the wound, added more medicine, and changed the bandages every hour. I was truly starting to believe they were making him worse. After their last visit, I'd told them not to come back. They'd given me tight-lipped responses while sharing secret glances, and I knew they wouldn't listen, which meant I wouldn't be able to leave his room at all. So I remained in bed with him, stroking his heated skin, brushing his wet hair from his face, trying, and failing, to reach him through thought.

Even more troubling was as Nikkos's condition worsened, I could feel the strength of my magic slipping away, that siren inside me hiding in the shadows. The buzzing magic in my veins had receded to a slow trickle. It was then I realized how much my magic had come to depend on his love. If he died, I feared my magic would die with him. Then how would I protect the girls and Blaze?

The girls played with their dolls by the hearth after taking a long nap with me. They'd been especially good today, quietly playing while casting me furtive looks as I fussed over Nikkos. Draevyn had fortunately stayed away most of the day after our awkward encounter in the garden, but I knew I'd need to face him again soon. I cringed when a sharp rap came from the sitting room door. Speak of the demon. I knew it was him.

I heard muffled footsteps in the sitting room before he poked his head inside the bedchamber. "Any improvements?" he asked as he walked over to the bed.

"No," I answered, watching as he checked beneath the bandage.

Up until this point, Draevyn's concern for his brother had brought me a small measure of comfort, but the panic that

flashed in his eyes as he looked at the wound was nearly enough to send my heart and soul plummeting into the abyss. His wings drooped as he sat on the bed, clasping his brother's hands. He let out a sound like a strangled sob and then quickly stood, turning his back to me and crossing over to the balcony, but not before I saw the tears welling in his eyes. He clutched the banister, his spine rigid as he stared up at the midday sun, and I felt his despair deep in my soul. Though I mourned for Nikkos, too, this was a different pain, for I'd felt this sorrow once before—the night my parents had told me Shiri had been mauled by a bear.

“Auntie, I'm bored.”

I hadn't even noticed Aurora approach the bed. I swiped tears from my eyes. “I'm sorry, girls. We can't leave Uncle Nikkos.”

Shoulders sagging, she dragged her feet back toward her sister, plopping on the floor with a sigh.

Draevyn cleared his throat as he walked back into the room, his hands and wings tucked behind his back. “Shirina, if you would indulge me for a moment, I'd like you to meet someone who could help you with the girls.” He crossed to the bed and held a hand down to me.

I recoiled away from him. “I don't need help.”

He grimaced, his gaze drifting to his brother. “You do, especially if—” He bit down on his lip, but I didn't need him to finish his sentence. I knew what he was going to say. *Especially if Nikkos passes away.*

Fool that I was, I took his hand and let him help me off the bed.

“Come,” he said to the girls. “Let's go to your nursery for a moment.”

The girls gasped and jumped up. Ember raced to my side, grabbing my free hand. Aurora, brave girl that she was, eagerly took Draevyn's other hand. For a moment, I thought oddly, we looked like a complete family. But, no. Draevyn wasn't my mate, and we'd never be complete without Nikkos.

He walked us just a short distance down the hall to another set of double doors into a big room with two pretty canopy beds on one side, and tables with bench seating and rows upon rows of dolls and other toys on the other. The girls let out excited squeals, running toward the toys and snatching them off shelves.

A middle-aged woman clomped into the room, her hooves poking out from beneath her plain, black dress, a long black veil pushed behind her rotating fawn ears as she smiled at us.

The girls gasped, dropped their toys, and ran back to me.

“It’s okay,” I murmured, wrapping protective arms around them.

The satyr and Draevyn exchanged tender smiles before he escorted her toward us. “Mrs. Euphemia,” Draevyn said, nodding toward the girls and me, “these are the princesses Shirina, Aurora, and Ember. Mrs. Euphemia was our favorite nursemaid growing up. She was more than a nursemaid. She was like a mother to us.” The look he gave her wasn’t just one of pride, but gratitude as well. “She is kind, protective, and fair with discipline.”

A nursemaid? The girls had me. They didn’t need a nursemaid.

Euphemia curtsied, which seemed rather formal considering the circumstances. “Your Highnesses, it’s an honor to meet all of you.” When her smile settled on the girls, they turned in to me, burying their faces against my skirts.

“Nice to meet you as well,” I said, my words coming out harsher than I’d intended, “but I don’t need any help with the girls.”

Draevyn ruffled his wings. “Of course you do.”

I shot him a scowl before turning back toward the nursemaid. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Euphemia, but I don’t trust anyone else to watch them.”

“No need to apologize,” she said. “I understand. Lord Inferni has told me much about what you and the girls have been forced to endure.”

“Mrs. Euphemia, if you would allow me.” Draevyn held out a hand and Mrs. Euphemia took it.

The girls and I gasped when he rolled up her sleeve, exposing angry red welts where her fawn fur should have been.

Draevyn rolled her sleeve back down, shadows falling across his eyes. “She got these scars the night our parents were killed. She ran into a burning tower to save Nikkos and Blaze from a fire that ravaged the castle. If you think this is bad, know that the healers cured the worst of the wounds.”

Mrs. Euphemia didn’t say a word as she hung her head.

Emotion clogged my throat. “Oh, I’m sorry that happened.”

“Me, too.” She smiled and then wiped her watery eyes with the backs of her hands. “But I’m grateful at least my boys survived.”

Draevyn handed her a handkerchief, and she let out a heart wrenching sob. “Forgive me.” She dabbed her eyes with the cloth. “I’m just so worried about Master Nikkos.”

“I understand,” I said. “So am I.”

And then for some reason we gravitated toward each other, and she took me in her arms, holding me tight. I hadn’t realized until that moment how much I needed a hug, but I practically melted into her, unable to stop the flow of tears. I was so afraid Nikkos would die. I’d already lost so much. How could my heart survive losing him, too?

“It’s okay, my dear,” she soothed, rubbing my back. “Let it out. Let it all out.”

And so I did. I held this woman, and she held me, and together we cried. Her hugs reminded me so much of my mother’s hugs, of Tari’s hugs. And even though I had only just met her, I felt as if I’d known her my entire life.

“Why’s Auntie crying?”

I pulled back at Aurora’s question. Oh, the girls. How had I forgotten about them? I thanked Draevyn when he handed

me a handkerchief, and I wondered if he had an unlimited supply of them. I dried my tears and even blew my nose into the fine fabric. I hoped he wasn't expecting to get it back.

Draevyn cleared his throat, his features as hard as iron, though his eyes shone like two iridescent pools. "As you can see, the nursery isn't far from your bedchamber. Mrs. Euphemia is an excellent reading and music tutor as well."

I didn't know what to say to that, though maybe he was right. The children did need to learn how to read, and music lessons would be a dream. My parents couldn't afford to buy us instruments, so we'd used the only ones we had—our voices. I'd always wanted to learn how to play the flute or the harp. How fortunate the girls would be if they learned how to play musical instruments. And Mrs. Euphemia certainly was kind. I knew she would be a patient and loving nursemaid.

Aurora pointed down at Mrs. Euphemia's feet. "You have furry legs like Cook."

She dabbed her wet eyes while smiling down at her. "That's because he's my brother."

Ember tugged on Mrs. Euphemia's skirts. "Have you had his tarts?"

"Oh, yes." She knelt beside the girls until she was eye level with them. "They are the best, a secret family recipe passed down from our great-great grandfather."

The girls shared excited looks, and I could tell they were mentally speaking.

"They're our favorite food in the whole world," Aurora finally said while moving closer, pressing against the nursemaid's knee.

"Mine, too." Mrs. Euphemia squeezed their hands, her eyes lighting with mirth. "I love the cherry and the spinach ones. What about you?"

The girls shared confused looks.

"I don't know." Ember shrugged.

"We didn't know there were other flavors," Aurora added.

“Oh, he makes all kinds.” Mrs. Euphemia tenderly brushed their hair behind their ears, a sweet gesture I found myself doing often enough. “We will have to ask him to make a variety for lunch.”

Both girls pressed up against her knees, leaning on her as if they were the best of friends.

“Auntie,” Ember asked as she blinked up at me, “may we stay with Mrs. Euphemia?”

My breath hitched at the thought of leaving them.

“Then you can focus on Nikkos and maybe get a little rest,” Draevyn said to me before I could answer.

“Alright,” I finally relented, forcing out the words before I changed my mind. “Aurora,” I said to my niece, giving her a knowing look, “you know to come back to my room if you and your sister are frightened.”

She eagerly nodded. “Yes, Auntie.”

I hugged them both until they complained that I was crushing them and squirmed out of my embrace. And before I knew what was happening, Draevyn was escorting me back to my room.

I chewed my bottom lip, worried he would follow me into my bedchamber and try again to court me. I was feeling way too vulnerable to be alone with him, my emotions muddled, my heart crushed beneath the weight of my sorrow and fears.

I tensed when he followed me into the sitting room adjoining my bedchamber. When the door clicked shut behind him, I turned on him with a snarl. “If this was a ploy to get me alone—”

“It wasn’t.” He held up his hands, his back pressed up against the door, his expression unreadable except for a strange gleam in his eyes. “I just wanted you to know if you need anything at all, don’t hesitate to ask.”

I motioned through the sitting room’s open doors toward Nikkos sleeping as still as a corpse in my bed. “I have all I need, thank you.” And with that, I held my breath while

walking toward Nikkos, fearing if I dared to breathe, I would fall apart before I reached him.

The door clicked shut, and I was left alone with my injured mate and my dark thoughts. I crawled into bed, laid my head on his warm chest, and cried myself to sleep.

* * *

“Auntie!”

I woke with a start as the girls climbed across the bed, their dresses crinkling with the movement.

I blinked up at Ember as she straddled my chest, clutching my shoulders. “It’s time for tea. Come see all our new dolls.”

Groaning, I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. “W-what?”

I grunted when Aurora sat on my stomach. “Mrs. Euphemia said we can eat in our nursery, and we get tea and spinach and cherry tarts.”

Brows crossing, Ember scowled at her sister. “We only get the cherry tarts if we eat the spinach ones.”

“Will you come with us?” Aurora pleaded.

“Hang on.” I let out a blubbery breath and gently pushed the girls off me. That’s when the smell from Nikkos’s wound hit me like a frying pan to the head. I pressed a hand to his heated chest, then pulled back with a start. His skin was on fire!

I gasped when two sets of stony eyes blinked down at me. The nurses were here, fresh bandages in their arms and a bowl of that awful ointment was on the table beside the bed. I swore the cure was worse than the injury.

“We will alert you if there are any changes, Your Highness,” one of the nurses said, her lips pinched in a stern scowl.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, scooting to the other side of the bed. “Where is Lord Draevyn?” I asked them.

“Up on the battlements with his men,” the other nurse answered.

“I see.” I took the girls’ hands, helping them off the bed. I would send for Draevyn and insist on new nurses and a new poultice. This one clearly wasn’t working.

After freshening up, I lingered near the bed one last time, eyes narrowed as I watched the nurses clean and treat his wound again. They worked with stiff movements while stealing stealthy glances in my direction. I was convinced they had no idea what they were doing.

I opened the door and hailed a passing servant, a young woman with pale skin and a long nose. “Please send for Lord Draevyn,” I said loud enough for the nurses to hear. “I wish to speak to him about Master Nikkos’s current treatment.”

The woman curtsied and hurried away.

“Are you coming with us, Auntie?”

I looked into Aurora’s pleading eyes, hating to refuse her, but I shook my head before warily eyeing the nurses. “I don’t want to leave Nikkos.”

The door swung open and Mrs. Euphemia stood on the other side, her fawn ears rotating. “I’ll sit with him, Your Highness,” she said as she curtsied, offering me a warm smile. “I have already alerted the servants the young princesses are ready for tea.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Euphemia.” I heaved a sigh of relief before turning toward the nurses with a scowl. “You’re dismissed.”

Their mouths dropped open as they shared secretive looks.

“But we haven’t added the poultice,” one of them said.

“We’ll do it.” I waved them away. “You’re dismissed.”

They brushed past me, their faces twisted, their noses turned up. It was then I decided they weren’t treating Nikkos any longer, and not just because they were rude. No, I got a bad feeling about them. I couldn’t describe it, but I couldn’t shake the fear they were making Nikkos worse.

I went to him, resting my hand on his cheek. “The poultice isn’t working.” I pulled my hand back, shaking it off as if it

was on fire. “He’s burning up with fever.”

“It’s normal for Ravini mages to turn feverish when they’re unwell,” Mrs. Euphemia said as she placed a hand against his forehead. “It’s part of the healing process.” Her nose wrinkled as she sniffed the air. Did she smell something off, too, other than the rotten stench of infection?

I chewed my bottom lip, casting Nikkos another worried glance. I didn’t remember my father turning feverish during sickness. Then again, I never remembered my father being sick. “Do you know about poultices?” I asked her.

“I do.” She picked up the wooden bowl with the poultice, sniffing it and then arching away with a scowl. “My husband taught me about many herbals. He was especially fond of the plants that grew in the dark forests.”

I wanted to ask her what happened to her husband but thought better of it. Considering that she wore all black, I assumed her husband had died. “Doesn’t the poultice smell off?” I asked her, nervously toying with my fingers.

“Hm.” She scowled down at the bowl. “Something does smell different. If you’d like, I shall take some of the poultice back to my study and examine the contents.”

“I would like that very much,” I said, feeling some of the tension that had wrapped around my spine loosen just a fraction. “Thank you. Don’t put the poultice on him yet, not until after you examine it.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” she answered while checking the wound beneath his bandage. “I’m going to clean the old poultice out of the wound and redress it.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” I said, feeling confident for the first time that Nikkos was under good care.

“Come on, Auntie.” Aurora tugged at my skirts while pinching her nose. “It stinks in here.”

“Go with the girls,” Mrs. Euphemia said to me, her eyes warm with concern. “I won’t leave his side.”

“Thank you.” I heaved a relieved sigh before letting the girls lead me away.

“Don’t you love our nursery?” Aurora asked as the girls led me back to their room.

“Isn’t it big?” Ember added.

I looked around the nursery once more. Some of the toys on the shelves had shifted, and I noticed several of the dolls had been moved to one of the beds or else were sitting on the low chairs at the long table in the center of the room.

“Look at our bed, Auntie!” Aurora squealed, flying on top of the bed as if she had wings. It took me a moment to realize she’d teleported there.

Ember scooted a stool toward the bed and grunted as she climbed up and crawled next to her sister. “Mrs. Euphemia says we may sleep here tonight.” Ember pointed to the other canopy bed across from hers. “And she will sleep in that bed.”

I lowered myself onto a rocking chair, wincing when a toy squeaked beneath me. I pulled out a soft little stuffed rabbit with buttons for eyes. “You don’t want to sleep with me?” I asked, doing my best to keep the tremors from my voice. How was I supposed to sleep with them in another room? I wouldn’t be able to protect them if the castle was attacked.

The girls shared a long look before Aurora turned to me, her brow creased. “It smells in your bed.”

“And look at our pretty bed,” Ember added, smoothing her hand across the pink satin blanket. “It’s smooth, just like our new dresses.”

I swallowed at that, averting my gaze. They were growing up and didn’t need me treating them like babies anymore, but I couldn’t help but worry.

“Look at all these books with color pictures.”

I gave a start when Aurora appeared behind me, a book in her hands.

Ember grunted again while climbing down from the bed. “Mrs. Euphemia is going to teach us how to read them,” she

said as she joined her sister.

Aurora turned the page, revealing a family of smiling dragons blowing puffballs of smoke while frolicking in the clouds. I doubted any dragon families were truly so congenial. My parents had told me dragons were known for their quick tempers and sullen natures.

Aurora leaned against me, resting her elbows on my leg. “She says we don’t have to do lessons until we’re settled.”

Ember thrust a doll with shimmery white hair and a deep blue satin dress into my lap. “Do you like our dolls?”

“Yes,” I answered, gently stroking her face. “They are very pretty, but not as pretty as you girls.”

Both girls giggled and climbed into my lap. I held them to my chest, cherishing our moment together. There were times like this I never wanted them to grow up. I wanted them to stay little forever, so I would always be able to keep them close.

Two servants entered the room, pushing a cart with steaming tea and fragrant smelling pastries. After they laid out the spread on the table, I instructed them to take some food to Mrs. Euphemia. They obediently nodded and slipped out of the room.

I let the girls take my hands and lead me to the table. The servants had left a steaming pearl-colored carafe with yellow and blue flowers and a two-tiered tray of tarts, savory on the bottom and sweet on the top. The children instructed me where to sit, at the head of the table, in a chair that was much too small and much too low to the ground, but I didn’t complain.

“Kylar and Isabeau are going to take tea with us, if that’s okay,” Ember said, pointing to a stuffed wolf and a doll with dark hair in tight ringlets at the other end of the table.

Kylar and Isabeau? Why did those names sound familiar?

Then I suddenly remembered. “Kylar?” I asked Ember as I poured each of us tea. “That was your other wolf pappo’s name.”

“I know.” She sat in a chair next to me, her legs swinging back and forth. “He told me.”

I nearly spilled the tea. “Is-is he here now?”

“He’s always with me, Auntie.” She scooped up a spoonful of sugar, spilling half of it onto the table before the spoon made it to her tea. “He’s one of my friends.”

“And Isabeau, too?” I asked as I looked around the room for any sign of the old wolf’s spirit.

“Yes, my other auntie,” she said as she attempted to pour the cream, “though she’s not big like you.”

I regained enough of my senses to help her steady the saucer and pour enough into her cup that it didn’t spill over. I remembered Tari telling me her mates had a little sister. Isabeau? I repeated the name in my head. Yes, that was her name, wasn’t it? Elements! How had I not realized her ‘friends’ were her actual dead relations?

Ember giggled while taking a sip of her tea. “They think it’s funny I named our dolls after them.”

“Oh.” Despite the wild pounding of my heart, I tried to sound unaffected while helping Aurora pour cream and sugar into her tea. “What else did they say?”

“May I have more sugar, Auntie?” Aurora asked.

“No, dear,” I answered firmly when she pouted. “One spoonful is enough.” I used tongs to give each of us a savory-smelling tart with swirls of green leaves.

“They said you’re right not to trust the nurses.”

I accidentally dropped the tongs. They hit the porcelain dish with a *clank*. “Did they?” I smoothed my trembling hands down my skirts. “Did they say why?”

Aurora pointed her spoon at me. “Your cheeks are turning red, Auntie.”

“Eat your spinach tart, dearest.” I forced a smile, nodding toward the pretty tarts with red centers at the top of the tray. “And then you can have a sweet one.”

“They can see their darkness,” Ember answered.

All moisture evaporated from my mouth. I had to force myself to take several gulps of tea. “What darkness?” I finally asked after I set the cup back down with trembling hands.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged while biting into her tart. “I don’t always understand them.”

I wondered what else these ghosts knew. I contemplated telling Draevyn, but would he believe us, or would he think we’d gone insane? And would he judge Ember harshly for her abilities? Mediums were usually ostracized in the Fae world, even by other witches. I wouldn’t subject my niece to his scorn, too. As soon as Blaze arrived, I’d tell him. I prayed he’d return to me soon.

I swallowed back a lump of emotion while trying to quell my trembling limbs. “Tell them I said ‘thank you,’” I said to Ember.

She laughed. “They can hear you, Auntie.”

“Oh.” I shot up straight, the tiny chair’s unforgiving wood digging into my spine. “What other friends do you have with you?” Namely, were my mates’ parents here, and could they tell her who murdered them?

“I don’t know their names yet,” she said, her legs swinging beneath her as she nibbled her tart. “They’re shy, but they said to keep the nurses away from Nikkos.”

“I certainly will.” Dread poured through my veins like poison leaching into my soul. What had those nurses done to him? After I finished tea with the girls, I was determined to force it out of them. I eyed my niece while taking a sip of tea. “Did you just meet these new friends?”

She nodded.

“I see.” I did my best to infuse a note of neutrality into my voice. I couldn’t let her know I was agitated. “Are they from this castle?”

“Yes.”

Elements. It might be Lord and Lady Inferni. Would they tell us who killed them? Would I want to know? “Will you tell me when you learn their names?” I asked her sweetly, pretending as if we were talking about something as mundane as the weather.

“Okay.” She heaved a dramatic sigh. “I’m tired of talking about my friends.”

“Me, too!” Aurora blurted. “You haven’t even seen all our new books.”

I rubbed their backs, forcing a smile. “After tea,” I said. “I can’t wait to see them.”

I was rewarded with broad smiles, a balm to my troubled heart, for very soon I feared we’d have the answers we sought, and the answers we dreaded. What if my parents had somehow been the killers? Or worse, what if it was Malvolia? Would my newly forged bond with my mates be able to withstand the brutal aftermath of such a discovery? For if Malvolia had killed my mates’ parents in an attempt to frame my parents, I feared that I would become the white witch in her prophecy, and I wouldn’t rest until I had the sorceress queen’s blackened heart on a platter.

* * *

Draevyn

I stood outside Shirina’s bedchamber, my hand poised above the door, summoning the nerve to knock. What a coward I’d been reduced to. She’d summoned me, after all. Besides, I was Lord of the Manor, and I didn’t need permission to visit my fated mate. I couldn’t get the image of Shirina crying in Euphemia’s arms from my mind. It should have been me holding her, comforting her. But, no, I’d ruined my chances with her, possibly forever. And now my baby brother was near death after I’d abandoned my mate and brothers. All this could’ve been avoided had I stayed with them. I would’ve recognized the danger and ordered them to fly around the trolls. It was taking every last scrap of willpower for me to hold myself together, to be the Lord of the Manor my people

needed when all I wanted to do was clip my wings and hurl myself from the tallest tower.

Heaving a trembling breath, I finally knocked on the door, tensing while waiting to push it open. I knew Shirina wouldn't beckon me to come inside. She'd already made it clear she wanted me nowhere near her, but I couldn't stay away. That pull between us beckoned me like a siren calling a ship to shore. I finally pushed open the door, my heart plummeting when she sat up and looked at me, disappointment reflecting in her eyes. I knew she was hoping I'd been Blaze.

"How is he?" I asked as I went to their bedside. The smell coming from my brother's wound was unbearable. I had no idea how Shirina could stand it. I noticed bowls of lavender petals everywhere. Lavender petals were even scattered across the bed. It didn't mask the putrid stench, though. That wound had festered, looking like a fist growing out of the top of my brother's head.

"Not as feverish as before," she said as she mopped his brow with a wet cloth, tenderly dabbing at the wound. "I summoned the nurses for questioning, but the servants report their bedchamber is empty." Shadows fell across her features. "Did you know they were leaving?"

Alarm sirens went off in my head. "No." Why would they leave, and where would they go?

She climbed from the bed and stood in front of me. Her skin had a damp sheen, her wet hair tied back behind her, and she smelled of lavender and honey. I clenched my fists until my nails broke skin. How badly I wanted to reach for her and trail kisses across her smooth neck, devouring her nectar.

"Draevyn," she said, biting her lip and twisting the hem of her robe. "I know you think they were good nurses, but Mrs. Euphemia is examining the contents of the poultice. She agrees with me that something seems off."

I swallowed at that. "What do you think it could be?"

"I don't know, but if they return, they will not treat him again, and I will be allowed to question them using my siren

voice.” She dragged a hand through her hair, her gaze wandering toward my brother, lying far too still in her bed. “I will not budge on this. Understood?”

I nodded my agreement. How could I not? “Excuse me,” I said as I strode out to the balcony. I flew up to the battlements, giving a guard lieutenant explicit instructions to immediately organize a search party. These nurses would be found and interrogated. Surely, there had to have been a misunderstanding. Why would they want to harm my brother?

I returned to Shirina’s balcony, not surprised to see her standing by the railing. She’d wrapped a blanket around her narrow shoulders, moonlight painting her skin in an ethereal glow as she watched the western skies, her eyes shining with longing. How I wished she longed for me in the same way she pined for my brothers. She didn’t move or bother to spare me a glance as I landed beside her. Her hair was plastered to her face, and she had dark circles under her eyes. Even worse were her concaved cheeks. She’d appeared a little thin when we’d first found her, but now she looked like she was wasting away.

I cleared my throat, summoning the nerve to speak. “I’ve sent a party in search of the nurses.”

“Thank you,” she answered, her gaze still focused on the sky.

“You don’t need to thank me, Shirina.” I dug my fingers into the banister, a deep chasm widening in my chest. I’d trusted those nurses to heal my brother, and instead they might have made him worse. What kind of a lord was I that I couldn’t keep my own brother safe within my castle walls? “I’m sorry I trusted those nurses.” Shame flushed my cheeks as the words came out on a rasp.

“Is that all you had to tell me?” she asked, her voice slightly cracking.

She wanted me to go, leave her alone so she could dream of my brothers in peace. “No.” I pushed off from the banister, unable to tear my gaze from the long column of her neck, the tilt of her chin, her luscious, full lips. “The servants told me you hardly touched your supper.”

She gave me a side-eyed glare. “As if I could eat.”

“You must keep up your strength.” I took a chance and moved closer, the lavender smell on her skin awakening the fire in my veins. “Shirina, forgive me, but you’re wasting away.”

She looked at me as if I’d kicked a puppy. “You expect me to eat when my mate isn’t waking?”

I forced myself to look away from the hatred reflecting in her eyes. “You think it’s not tearing me up that my baby brother might die?”

She threw up her hands, crossing to the other side of the balcony. “What do you expect from me?”

Fool that I was, I followed her retreat. “You don’t have to take all this burden on your shoulders. You can lean on me, too.”

Averting her gaze, she wrapped her arms around herself, looking too small and vulnerable for a powerful white witch. “You’re doing enough by providing us food and shelter.”

I took a chance and grasped her shoulders, desperately searching her face for any sign at all that she would acknowledge our bond. “I want to take care of you, protect you.”

My heart shattered when she jerked away and swiped tears from her eyes.

“Shirina,” I pleaded, my voice breaking, “will you ever be able to forgive me?”

She turned up her chin, the defiance in her eyes making her even more beautiful. “I don’t trust you not to hurt me or the girls again.”

I heaved a weary sigh. “I was consumed by rage. I won’t let that happen again.”

“When do you think Blaze will return?” she asked as she turned away, indicating she was done with that conversation.

I heaved a groan of defeat. I'd ruined my chance. She didn't want me, and I didn't think she'd ever want me. "With any luck, he should return tonight, tomorrow at the latest."

"I hope so." She walked toward the doors leading to her bedchamber and stopped, her spine stiffening. "I need to get to sleep."

"Goodnight, Shirina." I couldn't hide the longing in my voice if I tried.

She clutched the side of the door, her knuckles whitening. "Goodnight, Draevyn."

"I won't mind if you call me Drae," I called at her back, feeling like a fool when she didn't answer as she continued into her bedchamber.

Clenching my fists, I repressed a curse, fighting the urge to chase her and throw myself at her feet.

But then I spun around at the sound of wings beating overhead.

One of my lieutenants landed, his wings draped behind him as he bowed low. "My Lord."

"Yes?" I snapped, knowing it was wrong to take out my frustrations on him.

"The green witch has arrived," he answered, warily eyeing me as if I would set him on fire. "She said she needs a moment to rest."

"There's no time." I motioned toward the bedchamber. "Bring her here straightaway."

"Yes, My Lord." He bowed, then shot into the sky.

"Do you think she'll be able to heal him?"

The breath was knocked out of my lungs when I saw Shirina standing in the doorway, the gossamer curtains billowing around her, moonlight setting her skin aglow. She was a goddess. I swallowed back my longing, wishing so badly I could take her in my arms.

I took a step toward her. “She’s the strongest green witch in Delfi.”

“I didn’t know that!” Her eyes filled with tears. “Thank the elements!” She took me by surprise when she lunged for me and hugged me. I stood as stiff as a board, fearing if I hugged her back, I’d never let her go. She pulled away much too soon, her face and neck flushing before she disappeared into her bedchamber again, her light footsteps echoing across the floor like a whisper in the wind. I stared after her, wondering if that whisp of a witch knew how hard I’d fallen for her.

Chapter Sixteen

Shirina

I paced the balcony for what seemed like hours while the green witch worked on Nikkos. Night had long fallen, and it was especially cold tonight. I wore only a blanket wrapped around a thin nightgown, but I dared not go inside and disturb the witch's progress. Fortunately, Draevyn had lit a fire in a beautiful stone pit in the middle of the balcony. I took a seat on a comfortable chair by the pit, rubbing my hands together for warmth whenever I got too cold. Draevyn had stayed with me the entire time, alternating between sitting by the fire and checking the skies for any signs of Blaze, his quiet, calm presence oddly comforting.

I turned my gaze toward the closed double doors. It was so quiet inside my bedchamber, I was starting to worry the witch had fallen asleep. Or maybe she'd escaped to alert Malvolia I was here. Draevyn had said the green witch had sworn to secrecy, but her oath meant nothing to me, not after I'd been tricked and betrayed by my own parents.

"What's taking so long?" I finally asked Draevyn. "Tari could've healed Nikkos in minutes."

"Tari is a white witch," Draevyn answered as he slowly stood, stretching his wings, his soothing tone similar to the one I used on the girls when they were upset. "Most green witches take days to heal something this severe."

Chewing my bottom lip, I squinted at the glass doors, trying to see any movement inside through the sheer curtains. "What happens if she can't heal him?"

"She'll heal him." He crossed his arms, his wings falling around his shoulders. "She once healed one of my guards who was in worse condition."

That brought me a small measure of comfort. I looked away from him, thinking of how much I wished I had his wings to keep me warm. "I hope you're right."

“Have faith, Shirina,” he said as he crossed over to me, taking my hands in his. “The elements didn’t bring you together to tear you apart.”

“You’re right.” Swallowing, I looked down at our joined hands. He was so warm, I didn’t want him to let me go, but he wasn’t my mate, not my bonded mate, anyway. “Thank you,” I whispered.

He moved closer, his warmth enveloping me, his wingtips tickling my arms. “I’d do anything for you, Shirina.” He squeezed my hands, fire from his touch infusing into me. “Your hands are like ice. If you want, I could warm you.”

I swallowed at that as I got lost in the swirls of fire in his dark eyes. How badly I wanted him to take me in his arms. I needed someone to hold me and calm my fears.

Shiri!

I gasped, pulling away from Draevyn as I looked up at the sky. An army of Ravini mages flew toward us in a V formation, moonlight striking their silhouettes and setting white flame to their wings. One of them broke from the formation, flying as fast as a falling star, straight toward me.

“Blaze!” I cried, jumping up and down. “Look there! Blaze is back!”

He was flying at me so fast, I feared we’d collide, but he pulled up moments before striking the banister. He gracefully hopped over it and landed beside me, sweeping me into his arms. I buried my hands in his thick hair, melting in his warm embrace as he kissed me. I moaned into his mouth, deepening the kiss. He grasped my thighs and hoisted me against him. I wrapped my legs around his waist, laughing as we fell into a chair. He tasted like sweet mint and smelled of a heavenly blend of sulfur and sage. If I wasn’t so upset over Nikkos, I’d demand Blaze fly me to his bedchamber and make passionate love to me. If we didn’t get hold of our desire, that’s exactly what we would do, but, no, first we had to make sure Nikkos would be okay. What was taking that witch so long?

I've missed you so much, I said to him through thought, going boneless in his arms as he trailed kisses across my jawline. Words couldn't express my relief that he was safe and here with me. Somehow, I knew everything would be better now. Nikkos would heal, and my strength would return. It was already returning. Magic flowed through my veins like swelling rivers with each of Blaze's tender kisses.

He took my hands in his, brushing kisses across my knuckles, his eyes alight with fire. *You have no idea how much I've missed you*. His voice echoed in my mind. How I loved having this thought connection with him. *No more trouble from the giants?*

I shook my head. *They haven't returned*.

That's because my witch mate has amazing siren powers. He flashed a wide smile, pride reflecting in his eyes.

I wondered if he'd also seen my white magic, though I was too afraid to ask. What if I was the white witch destined to kill his queen? Draping my arms around his neck, I pressed my forehead to his. *What took you so long?*

I'm sorry, my love. His wings wrapped me in a cocoon as he rubbed warmth into my arms, his masculine heat setting fire to my veins. *My companions can't fly as fast as me, and I had to rest my wings. How is Nikkos?*

I don't know. I cupped his chin, rough with new beard growth. *The green witch is with him*.

I have every confidence she will heal him. His wingtips gently caressed my back. *The girls?*

Fine, I answered through thought. *They're with Mrs. Euphemia*. At least the nursemaid was more trustworthy than the nurses.

Oh! His eyes lit up with mirth. *She was our favorite nursemaid*.

That's what your brother said. My stomach roiled just at the mention of Draevyn, at how I'd come close to letting my guard down with him after all the horrible things he'd done.

Blaze's voice in my head dropped to a low rumble. *Has he treated you well?*

Yes. Too well if truth be told, causing my heart to get caught up in a cyclone of conflicting emotions, but I didn't want to tell Blaze that.

Good. Blaze's laughter echoed in my mind. *Maybe he's finally come to his senses.*

Maybe, I thought to myself, but that didn't mean I would bond with him.

We both turned around at the sound of Draevyn loudly clearing his throat.

I let out a little noise of protest when Blaze extricated himself from our loving cocoon.

I'll return to you momentarily, my love. Then maybe we can continue our reunion in my bedchamber, Blaze said, his eyes sparkling with desire.

Tremors coursed through me at the thought as moisture pooled between my thighs. I let out a groan of frustration when he released me.

He went to Draevyn, clapping him on the back. "Brother, thank you for watching after Shirina and the girls."

"Of course." Agitation flashed in Draevyn's eyes, and I got the feeling he was tired of people thanking him for doing his duty. His smile appeared plastered to his face as he clasped Blaze's shoulder. "I'm glad you're back."

"Me, too." Blaze winked at me, his desire thrumming between us like a living thing, and I flushed all the way down to my toes.

I tensed when the doors finally opened and a male servant, who looked mostly human except for slightly tapered ears, bowed before us.

"My Lords." He bowed even lower when he faced me. "Your Highness, the green witch wishes to speak to you."

I didn't wait to be told twice. I grabbed Blaze's hand and we ran into the room. I could hear the beating of Draevyn's wings as he followed closely behind. The rancid smell hit me like a brick to the head.

Blaze cursed. "Elements, the smell!"

My heart caught in my throat when a young woman with auburn hair plastered to her face and dark circles under her eyes frowned up at us.

"Well?" Draevyn asked gruffly. "How is our brother?"

She barely stood, leaning against the bed while making an awkward curtsy. "My Lord, I've been trying for hours, and he's made not the slightest improvement. In fact, I believe he's worse."

My knees buckled, and I would've hit the floor hadn't Blaze caught me.

He lowered me to a chair beside the bed, and I sat there gaping at Nikkos who laid there too eerily still, as if his soul was about to pass from his body.

"Wh-what are you saying?" Draevyn stammered.

"I'm saying he can't be saved." The witch hung her head. "I'm very sorry."

He can't be saved. He. Can't. Be. Saved.

No. I refused to believe it.

I stood on trembling legs, propelled toward the edge of the bed as if I was a puppet being pulled on a string. I felt a strange sense of detachment from my body, and I was looking through someone else's eyes down at my dying mate.

He wasn't moving. He didn't appear to even be breathing.

No! No! No!

Rage took hold of me, burning through my veins like a thousand flaming suns. I threw out my hands, magic spilling from my fingertips. "Everyone, out!"

Shiri! Blaze's reprimand echoed in my skull.

“Out!” I hollered, my siren voice reverberating like a gong.

Everyone scattered like they were being chased by the flames of hell.

Chest heaving and my heart pounding in my ears, I glared down at my mate. Nikkos wasn't going to die, because I wasn't going to *let* him die.

I straddled his waist, hands pressed against his chest. *Listen to me, Nikkos.* My siren voice echoed all around us, though I didn't feel my mouth move. *You will not die. Do you understand me?* I pounded his chest as magic poured from my fingers. *You will not die! You will find a way to heal yourself and come back to me!*

I cried out, rolling off him when his body suddenly went up in flames like a corpse on a funeral pyre. What had I done?

I flung myself back on top of him, desperate to put out the flames with my own body, not caring if the fire consumed me, too, only to be startled as a cool wind tickled my face and arms. I sat up, pressing my palms against his chest while watching the beautiful teal flames encompass him. And then I remembered the time he'd used similar flames to heal Aurora's arm. Holy elements! The fire was healing him!

* * *

Blaze

I paced the hall, listening for any sounds coming from inside the bedchamber. What had Shirina hoped to accomplish by throwing us out? And why? He was my brother. She was my mate. I should've been there with them. I understood why she was upset, but I was beyond frustrated that she'd pushed me away. Draevyn just stood there, leaning against the wall, the overhead candlelight casting shadows across his features, his wings wrapped tightly around his shoulders. Why was he being so calm when our brother was moments away from taking his last breath?

“Uncle Blaze!”

I stumbled back when the girls suddenly appeared before me, launching themselves against my legs. I hoisted them up

against my chest, and they clung to my neck. Even though I feared there was no hope for my injured brother, I was so relieved the children were safe. I had no doubt they'd been spared because Nikkos had shielded them.

“Girls! What are you doing here?” They smelled like fresh rosewater and they were clean, their cheeks flushed. Their faces even looked fuller. What a difference a few days at Abyssus had made for them. I wish I could've said the same for Shirina. She looked ill, her face gaunt, and I feared I wasn't just going to lose my brother, but my mate, too.

Ember laid her head against my chest. “We can't sleep.”

Aurora looked at me with watery eyes. “We're sad about Uncle Nikkos.”

Had someone told them he was dying? I knelt down, pressing my wings against the wall and balancing them both on one knee. “We are, too.”

Ember's lower lip hung down in a pout as a solitary tear slipped down her cheek. “My friends said he might join them.”

My veins solidified with dread as I gave Drae a helpless look.

“Her friends?” Drae asked.

“I'll explain later,” I answered. Nikkos had told me Ember was a spirit talker, but I wasn't ready to acknowledge her otherworldly friends could be right.

He pushed off from the wall, his face falling and despair reflecting in his eyes. Then he knelt beside me, grasping the girls' hands. “How about we bug Cook for some warm milk and biscuits?”

Both girls nodded, and Ember surprised me by holding her arms out to Drae. He took her in his arms, and I held Aurora. We jumped on top of the railing and soared down to the lower level, landing in the great hall before making our way to the dining room.

We set the girls on the table, and they held hands while their little legs swung back and forth.

“Is Uncle Nikkos going to die?” Aurora asked us.

“Not if I can help it.” Drae cupped her cheek, his gaze softening. “I will summon better healers.”

I didn’t want to argue with my brother now, but there were no better healers in Delfi. I’d no idea Drae had formed an attachment with the children. This soft side of him was unexpected. Did this mean he’d finally accepted Shiri as his mate?

Ember wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Our mommy could heal him.”

“I know she could,” I said, my heart feeling like a ship tossed about in a gale, “but she’s too far away.” If only she was here. I would forsake my allegiance to Malvolia just to save him.

Both girls hung their heads. Drae surprised me again when he carried them to a bench, rubbing their backs while they cried in his arms. I summoned a servant to bring biscuits and warm milk for everyone. I’d barely eaten these past few days, but I didn’t think I could stomach food right now.

Drae and I sat there in silence, watching while the girls ate and drank their milk. He wiped crumbs from their mouths in a sweet fatherly gesture when they were finished. My brother certainly had softened toward them. I didn’t smell him on Shiri or sense a bond between them. I worried Drae had ruined his chance to bond with her. It would serve him right after the way he’d treated her, but it would only make it harder on me, for now I would be Shirina’s only mate, tasked to protect her and the children without help.

A loud clomping echoed from the outside hall and then the doors were thrown open. Mrs. Euphemia stood in the doorway, a white lace nightcap on her head, her long pale gown laced all the way up to her throat. “Girls!” She threw up her hands and stomped toward us. “I woke up and you were gone! You scared me out of my wits!”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Euphemia.” Drae stood between Mrs. Euphemia and the girls. “We should’ve told you the girls

joined us for a late-night snack.”

Mrs. Euphemia gave Drae and me stern yet tender looks, and suddenly I was a child again, transported back to the nursery. I had always loved Mrs. Euphemia above all our other nursemaids. She wasn't as strict as our other nursemaids, but she always knew how to make us listen.

She wagged a finger at Drae and then at me. “You both should be abed, too.” She smiled warmly at me, her hands clasped in front of her. “Master Blaze, it's good to have you back.”

I thanked her with a brief bow. “It's good to be back.”

Mrs. Euphemia looked from Drae to me. “Any news about Master Nikkos?”

“No, not yet,” Drae cut in before I could speak.

I shot my brother a look. I didn't blame him for lying. That meant he wasn't giving up on Nikkos. Neither was I.

“Well, I'm sure he'll be just fine.” She gave us both a knowing look. I'd forgotten Mrs. Euphemia always sensed when we were lying. She nodded toward the girls who walked up to her and grasped her hands. “Shall I take them to bed?”

“Please,” I cut in.

“Aww,” both girls whined.

“You need to get your rest, sprites.” I knelt beside them, patting their heads. “If you're good girls, we'll play a game of hide-and-seek tomorrow. Would you like that?”

They jumped up and down. “We'd love it!”

I slowly stood, watching while Mrs. Euphemia took them away. I was again grateful they were safe. It was then I realized how much those girls had grown on me in such a short period of time. I considered them as much my family as my brothers and would've been heartbroken if anything had happened to them. I sent a silent prayer to the elements, thanking them for keeping the children safe. I stiffened when Drae cleared his throat behind me. As much as I wasn't looking forward to it, Drae and I had to have the inevitable

discussion, namely what to do after Nikkos passed. Malvolia would come calling soon, wondering why we never reported back to her after we'd been sent to kill Shiri's parents. We had to decide how best to protect Shiri and the girls.

When I turned to him, the stricken look in his eyes took me by surprise. His nose was still slightly swollen from my blow to his face, though not as bad as before. Strange how that fight felt like a lifetime ago.

"I'd like to thank you for beating sense into me." He released a long breath. "I'm sorry I let my rage get the best of me and that it took me so long to see I'd been acting like a fool."

I bridged the distance between us. Life was too short to hold onto grudges. The possibility of Losing Nikkos was teaching me that much. I grasped his shoulder, bending my head toward his. "That means a lot, brother, but it's Shiri you need to apologize to."

He heaved another sigh. "I did already."

I released him, stepping back. "And?"

Drae slouched on top of the table, his wings draped behind him. "She won't forgive me, and I don't blame her."

"Do you want me to talk to her?" As much as I understood her reasoning, now was not the time for my family to be divided, especially not when I knew Malvolia and her army would soon be upon us.

He shook his head. "She needs you to support her right now, not advocate for your fool brother."

I paced the floor, a whirlwind of worries weighing down on my shoulders. "I don't know how I'm going to do all this without Nikkos—keep Shiri and the girls safe. It's only a matter of time before Malvolia finds out about them."

"You don't have to do this alone." Drae pushed off from the table, balling up his hands. "I will help. Even if she never wants to bond with me, I will always be there for you and your mate."

His generosity nearly knocked me off my feet. “And if Malvolia tries to take her against her will?”

He clasped my shoulders, his features hardening. “Then I will stand with you, brother, to the death if I have to. I swear to you, I’m never forsaking you and Shirina again.”

* * *

Shirina

I had a fitful sleep, replete with nightmares and dreams. First came the nightmare. I was back on that mountain, desperately searching for my sister. They found me, their grubby hands all over me, pulling my hair, throwing me to the ground before ripping off my clothes. I was out of options, for I knew they’d use me terribly, killing me in the process. I had no choice but to unleash what I feared most, that dark voice inside me. I surrendered to my siren, and their dirt-crusting hands held their blades to their own throats, their eyes wide with panic.

I cried out in my sleep, but my dream shifted, and I was flying through the heavens, soaring on the back of a dragon, the heavy beating of his wings blowing my hair. Two loud beasts squawked behind me, but I wasn’t afraid. They were my friends. The air was humid and thick, and sweat dripped down my back, but I didn’t care about my discomfort. I was in love. Strong arms circled my waist, and I leaned back against a solid chest, the steady beating of his heart in time with my own. I felt free, unencumbered.

And terrified.

That I’d wake from this dream and have it all taken away. That once I discovered my true identity, I would be forced to part from the Fae I loved.

Tari!

I woke with a start, my sister’s name on my lips. I’d seen her! And on the back of a dragon! Had it been real? A vision? Or just a dream?

I blinked up at the overhead canopy. The bedchamber was still dark, lit only by a few softly glowing candles. I sat up, dragging my hands down my face, my nose wrinkling at a

putrid smell. I breathed in through a wheeze, and looked down at Nikkos as he looked back up at me, a slow smile spreading across his face.

Nikkos? Nikkos!

I fell on top of him, running my hands across his chest, his head. The wound had healed, leaving behind nothing but old, dried blood. My eyes watered over with tears, and I could scarcely draw breath. “You’re alive.”

He ran his hands up and down my arms, speaking on a slow drawl. “My siren mate didn’t give me a choice.”

I cupped his face and kissed him. I didn’t mind that his breath was stale or that the side of his head smelled like rotten eggs. I couldn’t stop kissing him, even as salty tears streamed from my face, running into my mouth. Nikkos was alive, and that’s all that mattered.

I draped my arms around his neck, straddling his waist as he wrapped me up in his wings. *I thought I’d lost you*, I spoke through thought, my throat too choked up for me to say the words aloud.

Never. His thought projected into my mind as he kissed me back. *I will always find my way back to you, my love*. He abruptly broke the kiss, his brow furrowed, and he looked at me as if he was still waking from a dream. *Are the girls okay?*

I stroked his face. *They’re fine*.

Thank the elements. He loosed a long breath. *My brothers, too?*

All fine, I answered.

What attacked us?

Trolls.

“Trolls?” he blurted aloud, looking around the room as if they could fit in our bed. “Where are they?”

Gone. I pushed back his shoulders when he tried to fly out of bed.

His mouth fell open. *You used your siren’s call on trolls?*

I nodded. *They went back into the mountains.*

You will never cease to amaze me, my beautiful, powerful mate. He cupped my face in his hands, kissing me again, deeply, passionately. Then he stopped kissing me and made a strange gagging sound.

I froze in fear. Was he sick again?

He leaned back, looking at me as if I'd sprouted wings before plugging his nose. "Elements, what is that smell?"

I slapped a hand over my mouth when laughter bubbled up in my throat. "It's the medicine they put on your head."

"Gah. It's awful." His cheeks flushed ten shades of red. "How can you kiss me?"

"I care more about the fact that you're alive than your smell." Besides, I guess I'd grown used to my mate smelling like an overturned outhouse.

He grabbed my arms, gently easing me off him. "I need a bath." He stumbled out of bed.

I thought about alerting the servants and Nikkos's brothers that he was alive and well, but selfish as I was, I wanted Nikkos all to myself for a short while longer. I followed after him, steadying him with a hand on his arm. "Maybe you should sit first." I led him toward the small dining table by the hearth. It didn't smell as bad at the table, the hearth's smoke chasing away most of the stench. Streaks of moonlight cut through the gossamer curtains, revealing a silver platter of savory and sweet tarts on the table that had been left for the green witch.

My stomach grumbled, and before I knew it, Nikkos and I were both stuffing our faces with crumbly tarts and downing goblets of wine. After we were both feeling a little stronger, we went into the bathing room to clean him. Nikkos added more kindling to the hearth and lit the candles hanging from the walls and the chandelier dangling overhead, bathing the dark room in a soft, yellow glow. The large tub still held my used bath water from this evening. I'd driven the servants out

of my chamber earlier so I could cry into the tub by myself, and they hadn't been back to empty it.

“Ahh,” he said, smiling down at the tub. He snatched a lavender petal from the water, rubbing it between his fingers. “Perfect.”

I admit I'd gone overboard with the lavender. It was the best I could do to drive away the stench of sickness that permeated the rooms.

“It might be cold, though,” I said as I helped him out of his putrid clothes.

He hit the water with a blast of fire. “Not for long.”

I threw the clothes directly into the hearth, and he set it ablaze. I knew there wasn't enough soap in all of Delfi to wash the stench out of the fabric.

I sat on a bench beside the tub and thoroughly scrubbed his hair with lots of soap and gently ran a wet sponge over his wings while marveling that my Nikkos had survived. I could hardly believe our good fortune when just hours ago I'd thought I had lost him forever.

I poured him a tall goblet of water, and he cleaned out his mouth and scrubbed his teeth with charcoal, mint leaves, and a small scrub brush. By the time we'd finished cleaning him, his gorgeous, hard body glistened beneath the candlelight, and he smelled like a lavender plant, a far cry from overturned, moldy outhouse. He finally stood, and I handed him a fresh towel, unable to take my gaze away from his long appendage jutting toward me like a spear. I gasped and then laughed when he shook out his wings, spraying water everywhere.

He flew out of the tub, knocking the breath from my lungs when he swept me into his arms and kissed me passionately, deeply. He tasted like sweet mint, his roving hands setting fire to my blood. I ran my hands through his wet hair, across his damp wings, finally settling on his warm chest and the fiercely beating heart beneath.

My Nikkos was alive and well. He would live to spend another day, hopefully a lifetime, in my arms.

I gasped when he slipped off my nightdress, my nipples pebbling in the cool air. I instantly warmed, melting into his hard body pressed against mine. He deepened the kiss and hoisted me into his arms, pressing my back against the wall. Groaning into his mouth, I wrapped my legs around his waist, his silky shaft gliding across my slick sex until I thought I'd go mad from the torture.

Take me, Nikkos, I pleaded through thought. Please take me.

I already have you, my love. His deep, dark voice echoed in my skull as he feasted on my neck. *You are mine, forever.*

His predatory growl reverberated the marrow of my bones. Digging his hands into my bottom, he lifted my hips to his, then slid into me in one swift thrust. He captured my cry with his mouth as he fully impaled me, thrusting into me over and over until I completely lost myself in the moment, surrendering to the inferno that consumed us.

The room was filled with a cacophony of our moans of pleasure mixed with the slapping of our slippery thrusts and the frantic flapping of his wings. I slid up the wall, his wings lifting us higher and higher as he vigorously pumped into me. When his thick hands dug into my breasts, his fingers pinching and stretching my nipples while he feasted on my neck, I completely lost myself to him, crying out his name as I was finally consumed by the fire racing through my veins, and the pure, maddening pleasure that captured me in its spell. He let out a roar, then stilled, flooding me with his seed.

I clung to him, enjoying the final twitches and spasms of our lingering ecstasy as we slowly slid back down the wall. I hadn't realized until we'd finally come back down to earth that my winged lover had pushed me so far up the wall, we were almost to the rafters. He moaned into my mouth while I tenderly stroked his wings, the feathers tickling my fingertips.

I would carry you to the bed, my love, he drawled, his deep, rich voice pulsating through me, *but I'm afraid we'll need to change the sheets and air out the room first.*

I don't need a bed, I answered while clinging to him as he began thrusting again, his hips rolling into me like a tempest's undulating waves. *I just need you.*

He was alive! My sweet fire mage was alive!

He captured my lips in a tender, heat-searing kiss, one of devotion, and desire, and love. *Shiri.*

Yes, my darling? I asked, my hands roaming all over him as I plastered his face with kisses.

I love you.

His words rang through me like a gong. The breath expelled from my lungs as I dug my hands into his shoulders, desperately searching his eyes that swirled with passion and fire. He loved me. He loved me!

Oh, Nikkos, I cried, kissing him with more fervor. *I love you.*

We clung to each other, our bodies feverishly grinding together, two lovers lost in a tempest, desperate not to let the maelstrom tear us apart. I couldn't get enough of him. I had to feel him everywhere, on me, in me, a reminder that he was alive and whole, that the nightmare of almost losing him was behind us. He took me to heaven again and again, his fire pouring into me, claiming me, and I knew even if the world burned around us, I would always find sanctuary in his arms.

* * *

By the time Nikkos and I had slid to the tile floor, sated and spent, my bones were as limp as noodles, and my stomach growled with intense hunger. After stumbling to our feet and making our way to the bedchamber, I clamped a hand over my mouth, fighting back my nausea when we were hit with the stench of sickness.

I slipped into a clean robe and Nikkos flew us to his bedchamber—which was just a balcony away from mine—a winged shadow in the night, fluttering from one room to another. His room wasn't as big as mine, but it smelled like him, sage, and sulfur, and most importantly, *not* like an outhouse.

I threw off my robe and slipped beneath the covers of his big, soft bed while he lit the hearth and several candles and rung for the servants.

Nikkos climbed into bed beside me, holding me in his arms when a servant wearing a starched black dress came into the room, looking at him as if she'd seen a ghost. It took her a moment to close her mouth and to remember to curtsy.

I had to admit, I was startled by her appearance, too. She looked to be part human and something else. She had hooves like Mrs. Euphemia, but she had two horns that curled out of the top of her head and a bearded face.

“Y-yes, My Lord,” she finally stammered.

“We’re famished.” He gave her an easy smile. “Could you please get us some food?”

“And summon his brothers,” I added.

“Yes, Your Highness,” she said to me, then bowed again and quickly clomped out of the room.

I rested my head against Nikkos’s chest, running my hands over his swirling tattoos while enjoying the steady beating of his heart—and the chaos that erupted outside his bedchamber. Servants shouted through the halls, and wings wildly flapped.

Nikkos kissed the top of my head. *Did Drae treat you well?*

I tensed at the question, wondering how I should answer. Would Nikkos and Blaze expect me to bond with their brother now that he was being kind? *I suppose*, I finally answered.

He pulled back, frowning down at me. “If he was unkind, I need to know.”

I shook my head. “He wasn’t unkind.” I looked away, unable to meet his gaze. “He’s been very attentive.”

“But?”

I dragged my hands down my face with a groan. “But how am I supposed to forget how he treated me?”

He grasped my shoulders, his eyes locking with mine. “I’m not asking you to.”

I swallowed, looking down at my hands folded in my lap. I wished I could easily forgive him, that my feelings weren’t so complicated. That his prior cruel treatment hadn’t unearthed dark memories and repressed feelings I’d been trying for two years to forget.

When Nikkos pulled me into his arms, I released a shuddering breath, letting a few tears silently fall while I clung to him. I pulled away, swiping the moisture from my eyes when the chamber door was thrown open.

Blaze came flying in followed by Draevyn.

“By the elements!” Blaze flew so fast to our bed, he nearly slammed into the wall. “I don’t believe my eyes.”

“How?” Draevyn clutched his hair by the roots, his mouth hanging open. “What happened?”

My heart clenched when I noticed both brothers had faces streaked with dried tears. Draevyn’s nose swelling had gone down slightly, too, though his eyes were still bloodshot.

Nikkos sat up in bed, squeezing me to his side. “Our clever mate used her siren voice and commanded me to heal myself.”

Blaze launched on top of us with a shout, crushing us both in a powerful hug before plastering my face with kisses. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

I pressed my breasts against his chest, painfully aware that my blankets had fallen down and I was exposed to Draevyn. Blaze didn’t seem to mind, though, as he continued to kiss me. Then the three of us hugged again.

“My mates are back in my arms,” I said aloud with a relieved sigh while clinging to them.

When the servants wheeled in the food and drink, Nikkos jumped out of bed in all his naked glory. “Thank the elements! I’m famished!”

The servants hurried out of the room, leaving just Nikkos, Blaze, and me. I looked around the room for Draevyn. I hadn’t

noticed him leave. I didn't want to ask about him, though, as we dug into the food, eating on top of Nikkos's big bed. I was nearly full by the time we dug into the custard tarts. Good thing, too, because my mates had other ideas for that custard, painting my breasts with the cream and suckling it off. I threw back my head with a moan, desire swirling in my veins as they feasted on me. And then I was tumbling into Blaze's arms, his sexual appetite ravenous as we made love with wild abandon. I could scarcely draw breath as my mates took turns loving me well into the morning.

Chapter Seventeen

I wasn't sure what time we woke, but the midday sun pierced the gossamer curtains and lit the whole room in pale yellow light. Nikkos rolled over and rang the bell for the servants, the clanging ringing loudly in my ears, reminding me I'd had far too much wine last night. When a bright shaft of light struck my eyes, I shifted in Nikkos's arms, ducking beneath the shadow of one of his wings. His feathers tickled my back, sending a trill down my spine.

Blaze stirred behind me, molding to my backside, his stiff member poking my rear. I rolled into his arms, giving him an expectant look. *Already?* I asked through thought.

His smile was the devil incarnate. *How do you expect me to respond to a naked, beautiful woman in my arms?*

My gaze focused on those full lips of his, that wicked smile. Even though I was thoroughly sore after so much passionate lovemaking, that heartbeat pulsed between my thighs, and I wanted him again.

"Mm," I moaned, arching into him when he gently kneaded my breast and trailed delicate kisses across my neck and collarbone.

Nikkos stirred behind me, his thick fingers cupping my dripping sex, his hard member pressing into my backside. So this was what mornings would be like with my mates? I could get used to this.

I jolted up at the sound of little feet running through the hall. My mates and I snatched the blankets, pulling them over our nude bodies just in time. A knock on the door, and it was shoved open by two servants wheeling in the breakfast cart, my nieces following behind them. My mouth watered at the heavenly aromas wafting into the room. The girls bolted across the carpets and jumped onto the bed with excited squeals.

"Uncle Nikkos!"

They climbed on top of him, kneeing him in the groin and stomach.

Nikkos let out a grunt and fell back.

“How come you’re in this room?” Aurora asked.

“It’s because the other room smells like troll doo doo,” Ember answered for her.

“Girls!” I scolded, pulling them off him and then snatching the covers before they fell and revealed my breasts.

The girls sat back on their heels, giving us curious looks.

“We’re so happy you’re not dead,” Aurora finally said.

Nikkos ruffled her hair. “So am I, sprite.”

Draevyn knocked on the door, peeking his head inside. I forced myself to look away from his penetrating gaze, but not before I caught the look of longing in his eyes. I refused to feel guilty for not allowing him in our bed. Despite all he’d done for us at Abyssus, I couldn’t forget the way he’d treated us before. He couldn’t fault me for not wanting him now.

Blaze tensed beside me. “What is it, brother?”

“News from Romulus,” Draevyn said as he pushed open the door.

Fear constricted my throat. “Have the giants returned?”

Draevyn gave me a look of adoration that bordered on worship. “Not after you used your powerful magic on them.”

Wrapping my arms around myself, I felt compelled to look away. Why did he always make me feel so awkward?

“I don’t wish to discuss it here, though.” He motioned toward the girls. “Meet me in the study in a half hour.”

Mrs. Euphemia clomped into the room, holding out her hands to the girls. “Masters Inferni, I’m so sorry,” she said, her cheeks flushed as she looked hopelessly at the girls. “I turned my back for a moment, and they slipped out of the nursery.”

Ember crossed her arms with a pout. “Uncle Blaze said he’d play hide-and-seek with us.”

I shot Blaze a side-eyed look. “When did you promise them that?”

He flashed a knowing grin as if I was a toddler caught with my hand in the cookie jar. “You were”—he coughed into his hand, slanting a wicked grin—“preoccupied with Nikkos.”

Heat flamed my face and chest at the way Blaze looked at me as if he was mentally undressing me.

He stretched his arms to the ceiling and flexed his wings. “Of course, girls, but later, okay?”

When they both whined, I silenced them with a look. “Not now, girls. Give your uncle time to wake and to do his chores.”

Their shoulders sagged in defeat as they hung their heads. How I hated disappointing them.

“Don’t pout, sprites,” Nikkos said, flashing his dreamy, dimpled grin. “If you’re good, maybe we’ll all play with you after lunch.”

They both squealed their delight and flung themselves at Nikkos once more. Mrs. Euphemia grunted, trying to extricate them off him.

“Remember, he said only if you’re good,” I reminded them.

They released him as if he was a hot potato and happily skipped away with Mrs. Euphemia.

“I’ll give you some privacy,” Draevyn mumbled.

He turned as if to go, but then our eyes locked for one uncomfortable heartbeat, that invisible tether between us making me want to jump from the bed and run into his arms. I couldn’t hold his stare for long, though my cheeks burned hotter as I felt his lingering gaze on me. When would this thing between us no longer be awkward, or would it always be this way? Unless I accepted him as my mate and bonded with him.

I couldn’t deny I wanted him. It was getting harder to fight that pull whenever he was near. But did that mean I wanted to mate with him? Maybe I could have forgiven his treatment of

me those first few days, but then he abandoned us, left us more vulnerable to attack. The giants might not have shot down Nikkos and the girls if he'd been with us. Then again, they could've still shot them down. What if Nikkos had been carrying just Ember? They would've both been crushed without Aurora to teleport them before they hit the ground. That still didn't justify him abandoning us. He'd apologized, though, but was it enough for me to forgive him? To trust him?

* * *

I washed in Nikkos's bathing room, and two female servants came in and pinned up my hair in pretty braids that twisted on top of my head and then helped me into a beautiful crimson gown. Though I hadn't yet had a fitting, the gown fit like a glove, the smooth satin reflecting iridescent hues of crimson and orange beneath the glow of the overhead candles, just like my mates' flames. It was absolutely perfect.

Blaze and Nikkos let out low whistles when I emerged from the bathing room. I bit my lip, unable to hide my smile as I admired my reflection in the mirror beside Nikkos's bed. My breasts looked so round and plump, spilling over the top of the gown like ripe melons hanging over the side of a basket. Green might have been Tari's color, but crimson was mine. It brought out the color in my cheeks and the amber flecks in my eyes. I had never known this before, for all my parents could afford to buy me were homespun dull brown dresses made of coarse wool. As I ran my hands down the smooth fabric, for the first time in perhaps my entire twenty-three years, I actually felt like a princess.

We ate quickly, sensing that what Draevyn had to say was of the utmost importance. After breakfast I freshened up once more for no other reason than my own vanity. Though I knew it was silly, I didn't want a hair out of place. I tried lying to myself about the reason why, but deep down I knew it was because I wanted to impress Draevyn. I wasn't going to bond with him, though, so why did I care what he thought of my hair? Maybe I did care. Or maybe I was just a cruel tease who wanted him to pine over what he had foolishly driven away.

His reaction to my hair and gown didn't disappoint. His eyes looked ready to pop out of his head when his brothers and I walked arm-in-arm into the study. Even from across the room, I felt that bond between us, an invisible tether pulling me toward Draevyn, and I suddenly wished I was wearing my old dress and hadn't done my hair. I couldn't look at him, so I looked everywhere else, pretending to be engrossed in the décor, even while my body and soul ached to get lost in his dark gaze.

The room was beautiful, with mahogany walls and rows and rows of books upon numerous shelves. Like the rest of the castle, the ceiling was exceptionally tall with rafters crisscrossing the top. Every room here reminded me of a birdcage, a palace fit for a Ravini nobleman.

He offered us all wine, and even though I'd only just woken up, I accepted a goblet. I sat between Nikkos and Blaze on a wide leather sofa, their wings protectively wrapped around my back. I felt vulnerable and self-conscious as Draevyn paced in front of us, his feathers standing on end.

Dragging his fingers through his hair, he let out a long sigh. "I just received a report of foreign mage sightings not far from here."

Blaze tensed beside me. "Who do you think it is?"

Draevyn stopped pacing, looking sideways at Blaze. "Romulus said they looked like Sol and Bertram."

Blaze and Nikkos swore.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Two of Malvolia's personal mages—and lovers," Draevyn answered, his eyes alight with flame. "Your sister recently killed their older brother, Mantus."

I swallowed at that, relieved that I sensed no censure in Draevyn's voice. I knew Tari wouldn't have killed this Mantus without good reason, but I feared his brothers would still demand retribution.

"Are we unsafe?" I asked on a strained whisper.

“No,” Draevyn answered, his shoulders falling, “but I would feel better if you and the girls remained indoors until we’re sure they’ve gone.”

“What do you think they want?” I asked.

Blaze hugged me to his side. “Probably sent by Malvolia to find out if we killed your parents.”

“And when they find out you didn’t?” I asked them.

Draevyn crossed his arms while leaning against the side of a big, mahogany desk, his wings hanging limply behind him as if he hadn’t a care in the world. “We’ll deal with that when it happens.”

I swallowed at that. How could he be so casual about this? “How safe are we?”

Draevyn pushed off from the table. “Very safe, but...” He trailed off.

Tension coiled around my shoulders. “But?”

He scratched the back of his head, his wings ruffling. “Eventually, they will want a report from us about what happened with your parents.”

My heart imploded when I saw the hopeless look Blaze’s eyes.

I leaned forward, pushing back the nerves that twisted my insides in knots. “And what will you say?” I asked Draevyn, though perhaps I should’ve been discussing this with my mates, not him. I didn’t care that he was Lord of the Manor. This conversation shouldn’t have concerned him.

Draevyn rubbed his chin, a strange gleam in his eyes. “I don’t know yet.”

I looked to Nikkos and Blaze. “We should find some other place to hide.” I wouldn’t be responsible for bringing Malvolia’s wrath to Abyssus.

“No place is safer than Abyssus,” Draevyn blurted.

I shook my head. “If my sister killed their brother, these mages could be out for blood.” And more innocents would get

caught in the crossfire.

“No doubt, but Malvolia pulls their strings.” Draevyn crossed over to me in a few long strides. “They won’t do anything without her blessing.”

I tensed, craning my neck to look up at him when he stood over me. “And you don’t think she’ll order them to kill me?”

The look he gave me made me want to crawl out of my own skin. “I think once Malvolia realizes your power, she’ll want you to serve in her army.”

I balled my hands into fists, not liking the direction of this conversation. “Against my sister?”

I pressed into my mates when he knelt in front of me. “Shirina, with your siren’s call, you could stop a war before it starts.”

My mates said nothing as they stiffened beside me, their wings protectively pressing into my back, their hands on my knees. They didn’t need to speak, though. Their silence spoke volumes. They wanted me to serve the evil sorceress queen, too. I wondered if that had been their plan all along.

I glared at Draevyn. “So you want me to serve Malvolia, the woman who put a price on my head when I was in the womb?” Had he lost his mind?

His brow creased, and I could practically feel the tension radiating off him, the bond between us thrumming and shaking like a rope stretched too thin. “What I want is for you to be safe, and siding with Malvolia will be the safest bet.”

I somehow found the strength to stand, slapping my mates’ hands when they reached for me. Then I bolted out of the room like I was being chased by dragon fire.

“Shiri,” Blaze called at my back.

“Shiri!” Nikkos hollered.

I refused to turn around. I ran up the stairs, ignoring my mates’ calls, the flapping of their wings behind me nearly drowning out the enraged roars inside my head. I reached my bedchamber and slammed the door in my mates’ faces. I ran to

my bed, which had been stripped of all sheets and blankets, left with nothing but bare feather pillows. I fell onto the bed and screamed into a pillow, furious with my mates for expecting me to serve that bitch, and even more angry with fate, because I feared I wouldn't have a choice.

* * *

Blaze

Even though my muscles were sore from all the flying I'd done this week, I flew like I was being chased by Malvolia's choking magic. I landed on the balcony to Shiri's room—our mother's room—and Nikkos landed soon after. I understood the significance of Drae letting her stay here. Though I was glad he'd finally come to his senses and accepted her as our mate, I feared he'd realized it too late, for I was starting to worry that Shiri wouldn't have him. Not that I blamed her after his behavior, but there was a reason why powerful witches took on more than one mate, and it wasn't just because of their demanding sexual appetites. The more powerful the witch, the more threats they faced. Shiri would need all three of us to help keep her safe. And now I feared her safety was in jeopardy more than ever.

A blade pierced my chest at the sound of our mate's soft cries echoing from inside the bedchamber. Nikkos and I shared a look before going to the open doors, the gossamer curtains blowing in the breeze. The servants had thankfully cleaned out the room. The strong smell of sage incense chased away the foul stench of Nikkos's sickness. The bed was devoid of bedding. I hoped the servants had burned it. The room was slightly cold as the hearth fire had gone out. I worried our mate was cold, but she might fight me if I tried to warm her.

Wings pinned behind me, I cautiously approached the bed. I didn't fear our mate hurting us, but I did worry about saying the wrong thing and driving a wedge between us. She was lying face down on the bed, her shoulders shaking as she cried into a pillow.

I sat beside her, gently placing a hand on her back, tensing when she flinched at my touch. *Shiri*, I called through thought,

please don't push us away.

You don't have to face this alone. Nikkos sat on her other side, running his fingers through her hair. *Please talk to us.*

She sat up, swiping the moisture from her eyes while crushing the pillow to her chest. “Do you agree with him?” she asked aloud. “That I should serve her?”

I loosed a long breath. I'd been dreading this conversation, but we couldn't put it off any longer, not when Malvolia's dogs were circling the gate. “If Bertram and Sol are here, it's only a matter of time before Malvolia finds you.” I swallowed back my apprehension. I wouldn't be able to contain my raging inferno if they tried to harm her or the girls. “Then what?”

She gave me an accusatory look. “You didn't answer my question. Do you want me to serve her?”

Did I? In my fantasy world, we would live out our days peacefully at Abyssus. The world could burn around us, but we would ignore it while living in our protective cocoon. Unfortunately, the world wouldn't work that way. Malvolia and Fachnan would both come for our mate, and if I had to pick one sovereign, it would be Malvolia. “We want to keep you safe,” I finally said on an exhale. “This might be our only option.”

Her eyes narrowed, and our bond burned between us like I'd set it on fire. “You said you'd bring us someplace safe.”

“We did,” I answered.

“There is no place safer than Abyssus,” Nikkos added.

She arched away from both of us, using that pillow as a barrier when I reached for her. “You said you wouldn't take us to Malvolia.”

Nikkos and I shared a look, and I knew if either of us said the wrong thing it could jeopardize her trust in us.

I swallowed back a lump of nervous energy while refusing to break eye contact. “And we didn't.”

Fire flashed in her eyes, and she reminded me of a cornered, wounded animal. “But what you failed to tell me is that she’ll come to me.”

“Shiri,” Nikkos said as he scooted on his knees closer to her, his wings dragging behind him. “There is no place where Malvolia can’t find you.”

I nodded my agreement. “She has spies everywhere. This was our best option.”

She crossed her arms, looking from Nikkos to me. “Answer me truthfully. Did you know I’d end up serving her when you found me?”

“Shiri,” I said through a sigh, dragging a hand through my hair, “when we found you, I won’t deny I thought about it. I knew Malvolia would love to have you in her army.”

She glared at Nikkos. “You, too?”

He shook his head.

“He was angry with me for suggesting it,” I said in his defense. If she was going to be angry, let it be me. I deserved her scorn, not Nikkos. He’d been loyal to her from the first day.

She visibly swallowed, her eyes welling up with tears. “And what about when you made love to me?”

I felt as if my chest had been split open by a mallet when her eyes flashed with mistrust. “The first time we made love, all I could think about was what heaven it was to hold you in my arms.” I offered her a weak smile, not surprised when she didn’t return it. “I didn’t think about you serving Malvolia then. After we made love, all I thought about was keeping you and the girls safe, and, yes, Malvolia came to mind. How could she not?” I gritted my teeth as the realization of what was to come twisted my stomach in a knot. “War is inevitable whether we like it or not, and I fear we’ll be forced to pick a side. Do we serve your aunt?” I paused, giving her a long look. “Or do we serve Fachnan who will try to kill the girls when he discovers who their fathers are?”

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. “And Malvolia won’t try to kill us?”

“I don’t think she will, not after we tell her what your parents tried to do to you, and when she realizes how much you can benefit her army.”

“As long as she believes you aren’t here to kill her,” Nikkos added.

“I’m not here to kill anyone. I just want to keep the girls safe.” She chewed her bottom lip, her gaze darting between us. “But what if she killed your parents?”

I shook my head. “There’s no way of knowing.”

“There could be,” she said softly while peering at me from beneath long lashes. “Ember has made some spirit friends here.”

I froze, gaping at her, feeling as if all air had been sucked from the room. “Our-our parents?” I stammered.

“I don’t know yet,” she said while twisting her fingers in her lap. “I’m trying not to pressure her for information. The spirits warned her not to let the nurses treat Nikkos. They said the nurses had a darkness surrounding them.”

I gaped at Nikkos then back at her. This was huge. Too huge. These ghosts could possibly know who killed our parents. Though I wondered if we would end up digging up ghosts that were better left buried. If Malvolia had killed them, that meant we would be at war against Fachnan and Malvolia, against the whole world.

I swallowed back my fear. “What else did they tell her?” And did I want to know?

“That’s it for now,” she said, smiling at Nikkos when he grasped her hand. At least she wasn’t angry with him. “I’ll keep trying to pry information out of Ember, but you know how touchy she can be.”

“What do we do if Malvolia killed our parents?” Nikkos asked, his wing draped protectively around our mate.

Fire raced through my veins. “We turn her to ash.”

Nikkos's eyes bulged. "Her mages will kill us before we can get to her." He visibly swallowed. "Or she will."

"No, they won't." Shiri turned up her chin, defiance flashing in her eyes. "I won't let them."

My gaze tunneled on her, and I felt as if I was seeing my mate for the first time. "Shiri, you could be the white witch prophesized to kill the queen."

Her nostrils flared, her magic pulsing off her in powerful waves. "I know."

When I looked into her eyes, I no longer saw the frightened, betrayed daughter begging us to take her someplace safe. No, I saw a goddess. I couldn't believe it had taken me this long to realize it. "Whatever the prophecy, know you don't have to face it alone," I said, resolve stiffening my spine. "We will face it together."

I felt her soul-shaking relief pulse between us before she threw herself into my arms. "Thank the elements I have you," she whispered, kissing my cheek.

"And you always will." I couldn't describe my relief as I clung to her, my hands in her hair, stroking her back. My cock stirred to life as she wriggled in my lap. A bad time to be thinking about sex, but when her mouth found mine, her breasts pebbled against my chest, I knew this was exactly what we needed. I laid her on the bed, and Nikkos and I took our time loving her and proving our dedication to our goddess, again and again.

Chapter Eighteen

Nikkos

After a thorough round of lovemaking, Shiri and I laid on soft carpet beside the fire. The balcony doors were open, the gossamer curtains billowing in the breeze. It was then I noticed the sun was beginning to set. Time passed too quickly today, and I hadn't even finished loving my beautiful mate. She rested her back against my chest while I wrapped her nude body in my wings. I rubbed her shoulders, channeling just enough of my mage fire to gently warm her skin. Exhausted from his long flight, Blaze slept in the bed. He'd only lasted one round with Shiri. He slept so hard, I didn't think a troll invasion could wake him. That was fine by me. I loved having my beautiful mate to myself.

"Mm. I like that," she said with a groan, her head lolling against my chest.

"Good," I whispered in her ear. "I want to learn everything you like."

A soft gasp escaped her when my wings gently caressed her breasts before moving lower, brushing across her belly and then tickling her thighs.

"And I want to learn what you like," she cooed, spreading her legs for me.

I nibbled her ear. "There is one thing I like."

She blinked up at me, her nipples pebbling when I tickled her breasts again. "What?"

I delicately traced her lower lip. "It involves your pretty mouth."

"Oh." She rolled in my arms, resting her palms against my chest. "Would you like me to try it now?"

I leaned back against the carpet, my erection jutting toward her like a spear. "If you insist."

She flashed a seductive smile before bending over me. I hissed when she licked the tip of my erection. Then I swore when a knock sounded on the door.

Gasping, she straddled me while I wrapped her up in my wings.

Drae pushed open the door, poking his head inside. “Hey, I’m sorry to interrupt your honeymoon again”—there was no mistaking the note of bitterness in his tone as his gaze settled on me—“but Mrs. Euphemia is insisting on a meeting.”

“Now?” I asked, distressed. She had only just begun.

“Yes, now.” His words were clipped. “Put some clothes on.” He heaved a long sigh. “Please.”

After he slammed the door shut, Shiri popped her head up, looking at me. “Looks like rude Draevyn is back.”

My heart sank at her words. “This isn’t like him,” I said, hating that Drae had put me in this position of having to defend him. “It must be something serious.”

She gave me a look like she didn’t believe me, and I couldn’t think of anything else to say in his defense. “That thing you were going to do with your mouth...” I said instead.

She bit her lip, her cheeks coloring. “I’ll finish after our meeting.”

Shiri slipped into a robe, and I wrapped a sheet around my waist. It took a little longer to wake up Blaze. He finally stumbled out of bed and Shiri wrapped a sheet around him just as the door opened again and servants came in bearing trays of steaming food. My stomach rumbled, and I realized we hadn’t eaten much today. We’d been too busy doing other things.

The three of us sat down to eat, the breeze from the open doors blowing back our hair and cooling our skin, when Drae came in again, Mrs. Euphemia by his side. She carried a dead plant with her, setting it down on a table by the doors. The brown leaves crumbled in the breeze, and I was suddenly struck with a terrible smell that reminded me of the stench I’d woken up to after I’d recovered from my injury.

Drae walked to the hearth, his wings tucked back, his mouth flattened in a grim line. At that moment, he looked far older than his thirty years, and I sensed the heavy weight he carried on his back. I didn't envy his position as Lord of the Manor. He looked longingly at Shiri sitting there between us. Even though he'd brought this on himself, I still felt bad that he'd been left out of our happy honeymoon.

"Your Highness, My Lords," Mrs. Euphemia said as she bowed before us. "Forgive me for interrupting."

"It's fine, Mrs. Euphemia," Shiri said as she slowly sipped her wine. "Where are the girls?"

"Napping," Mrs. Euphemia answered.

Shiri made a spluttering sound. "I haven't been able to get them to nap in two years."

Mrs. Euphemia smiled. "They played hard in the garden this morning and wore themselves out."

Shiri clutched her heart. "Thank you, Mrs. Euphemia."

"The pleasure is all mine." The nursemaid beamed, clasping her hands together. "It has been too long since we've heard the sound of children's laughter ringing in these halls." Then her features darkened. "But I'm afraid I've come before you now with more serious news." She motioned toward the plant. "I've finished examining the contents of the herbals used on Master Nikkos."

I shared confused looks with Blaze and Shiri. "I'm healed now, Mrs. Euphemia. You don't need to worry about it."

"I know, but..." She gave me an apologetic look before looking to Drae.

Icy tendrils of fear wrapped around my spine. I shot up in my seat looking from Mrs. Euphemia to Drae. "What is it?"

"The standard herbals that go into a healing ointment are sanitae, pultes, and oregano," Mrs. Euphemia continued. "The Fortis plant thrives on those herbals. I've been treating the Fortis plant with the herbals the nurses used on Master

Nikkos.” Bile projected into my throat when she nodded toward the dead plant.

The color drained from Shiri’s face. “It’s dead.”

“The Fortis is the strongest plant imaginable, able to grow in the harshest conditions.” Mrs. Euphemia cleared her throat. “There’s only one thing that can kill it.”

My feathers shook as I dug my fingers into the table. “What?”

She leveled me with a dark look. “Venenum root.”

Drae pushed off from the mantel, pacing the floor. “That plant only grows in the Werewood Forest.”

I jumped from my seat, clenching my hair by the roots. “The demon forest?” Werewood was on the other side of the mountain range, and if rumors were to be believed, nobody came out of that forest alive.

“Yes.” Mrs. Euphemia rubbed her chin. “It’s a poisonous plant, some say demon touched.”

Shiri clutched a fork in a white-knuckled grip. “Have your men found the nurses?”

“No.” Draevyn frowned. “I’ll send out another search party.”

My head spun. This couldn’t be happening. “They tried to kill me?”

“Something is afoul here.” Blaze leaned back in his seat, drumming his fingers on the table. “Very afoul.”

“Do you think Bertram and Sol are behind this?” I asked Drae. Could that be why the fire mages were spotted nearby?

Drae shook his head. “No, this is too sinister, even for them.”

“Then who?” I asked.

Drae’s shoulders fell, his wings drooping behind him. “I don’t know.”

Shiri wrapped her arms around herself, giving Blaze and me worrying looks. “I don’t feel safe here.”

Blaze grasped her hands, giving her an imploring look. “We’ll keep you safe, my love.”

Drae marched up to her, shadows darkening his features. “I will double the watch. I promise, Shirina, I will do whatever it takes to keep you and the girls safe.”

She didn’t answer him, her lips twisted in a snarl. It was at that moment I felt her hatred of my oldest brother in the marrow of my bones.

Pain flashing in his eyes, he gave her a curt bow. “If you would excuse me, I must relay this information to the guard.” He turned from our table without another glance and marched toward the door.

Wings propelling me forward, I followed him onto the balcony. “Drae, wait!” I called at my brother’s back. “I never thanked you for taking care of Shiri and the girls.”

He stopped, his back and wings rigid. “You don’t need to thank me for doing my job, brother.”

I clenched my fists by my sides. “Do you care for her?”

Wings dropping, he slowly spun around. “Why are you asking?”

I jutted a foot forward. “Do you?”

His shoulders fell, and I saw the hint of the young man my brother used to be, not quite a boy, not quite a man, scared and confused, yet determined to hold himself together for his brothers’ sakes. “Of course, I do.”

I released the breath I’d been holding, relief washing over me. “She’ll come around, Drae.”

He flashed a half smile that didn’t mask the sadness in his eyes. “I’m not sure she will.”

“Did you apologize?”

“Yes.” He dragged a hand down his face. “She doesn’t trust me to be kind, that I’ve changed, and I don’t blame her.”

“She’ll come around,” I repeated, not sure what else to say. I prayed she would. Our little pack needed Drae’s strength, his confidence, and his guidance.

He shook his head. “You said that already.”

“What do you want me to do?” I pleaded. I was in way over my head. All I knew was that our pack was fractured, and very much in danger. I didn’t think we could face the trials to come without Drae.

“Just love her the way I should have.” He cast me one last woeful look before jumping into the evening sky.

Clenching my jaw, I watched my brother fly away. I couldn’t blame Shiri for rejecting Drae after the way he’d treated her, but that didn’t assuage my fears. I didn’t think we could take on Fachnan’s army, Malvolia’s wrath, and now potential assassins without Drae’s help.

* * *

I returned to Shiri and Blaze with a heavy heart. I feared Shiri wouldn’t forgive Drae, though I didn’t realize how badly it would affect me. I felt Drae’s depression and envy deep in my soul as he watched Blaze and me with Shiri, and I wanted so badly to help him. Yes, he deserved her scorn after his churlish behavior. But did he deserve to be ostracized forever?

I wasn’t trying to excuse the way he’d treated Shiri, but Drae had suffered hardships that no child should have been forced to endure. He’d buried our parents and then raised Blaze and me without complaint. Drae had sacrificed so much of his childhood so that Blaze and I could grow up in a safe and happy home. Now once again he was sacrificing his peace and happiness to protect us. And we repaid him by ostracizing him. Even though I feared my plan could backfire, I had to say something to Shiri on Drae’s behalf.

My wings drooped as I shut the door behind me.

Shiri was sitting on Blaze’s lap on the sofa. They had their hands all over each other, kissing and laughing, and for a moment I was perturbed by their behavior after demons had

tried to kill me, when even now the world could be burning down around us.

I loudly cleared my throat, glaring eye daggers at them.

Shiri looked up from Blaze, her eyes fogged with desire. “Why did you leave?”

I gave her a pointed look. “I wanted to know why Drae was upset.”

She looked at me as if I’d grown a second head. “Demons tried to poison you.”

“Yeah.” I shrugged, managing to hold her gaze. “But that’s not the only reason.” I slowly approached her, knowing I was treading too close to her flame.

She arched back, her eyes narrowing. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“He said he apologized, and you said you don’t trust him.”

Blaze gave me a warning look, and I could tell he wanted me to shut my mouth, but I was too far gone now.

She arched a brow. “And?”

“Shiri, we’re in way over our heads.” Throwing up my hands, I heaved a weary sigh. How did I explain we’d be stronger if we all worked together? “We need Drae to help us protect you and the girls.”

She climbed out of Blaze’s lap and faced me with a glare. “He already said he would.”

I gave Blaze a pleading look, hoping he’d help, but the coward averted his gaze. “It would be easier if you two were bonded.”

She made a spluttering sound, and I knew I’d pushed her too far. “So you want me to have sex with the mage who threatened to drop me, who abandoned us when we needed him most, just to make your life easier?”

I felt like a wilting flower under the scrutiny of her glare. “I know he regrets the way he treated you.”

“As he should.” She crossed her arms, rage flashing in her eyes. “That doesn’t mean I’m going to accept him as my mate.”

My innards quaked. I didn’t know why I pressed on when I should’ve accepted defeat. “Then what else can he do to earn your trust and forgiveness?”

She turned up her chin, defiance flashing in her eyes. “I’m not sure there’s anything he *can* do.”

I stepped toward her, my voice breaking on a plea. “Shiri.”

“Don’t.” Disgust flashing in her eyes, she sidestepped me as if I had the plague. “I think I want to be alone for a while.”

I reached for her, inwardly cursing when she slipped out of my grasp like a water wraith. “Shiri, please don’t pull away.”

“Then don’t drive me away,” she called back while refusing to face me.

I followed at her heels like a puppy begging for pets. “I’m sorry I brought up Drae.” My voice cracked and broke, and for a minute I was that timid little boy growing up in a huge castle without any parents. The servants had been kind, but not a replacement for the picture of the handsome, regal couple hanging in the front hall. So many nights I would wrap my wings around myself, pretending they were my mother’s arms. “I won’t mention him again.” I chased her to the bathing room as she slammed the door in my face. “Please, Shiri.” I rested my palm on the door, my voice cracking. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, fuck.”

I spun around, glaring at Blaze, who leaned against the doorway leading toward the balcony, one ankle casually crossed over the other. I was aggravated with him for remaining quiet during the entire argument. Had he helped me, maybe she would’ve listened.

“Well, fuck?” I snapped. “That’s all you have to say? You know I’m right. You should’ve at least said something to her.”

“So she can shut out both of us?” Shaking his head, he pushed off from the doorway. “One of us has to keep

communication open with her.”

He had a point, but it didn't ease my frustration. “Do you agree it will be harder to keep her safe without Drae?”

He gave me a pointed look. “Everything will be harder without Drae.”

Exasperated, I threw up my hands. “Then what do we do?”

“As much as it pains me to say it,” he answered, “we do nothing. She and Drae have to figure this out on their own.”

I gaped at him. Was he serious? “What if they don't?”

He casually shrugged, though I sensed an undercurrent of fear in his voice. “Then we do our best to support our mate.”

So that was his plan? Do nothing? “What if our best isn't good enough?”

His wings fell, and for a moment, I thought I saw a flash of despair in his eyes. “It will have to be.”

* * *

Shiri

Tears streamed down my face as I sat on the cool tile floor, my back pressed against the wall. Out of all the brothers, Nikkos had always been the kindest, the one I felt I could count on to always support me.

What else can he do to earn your trust and forgiveness?

Nikkos acted as if his brother had moved mountains for me. He hadn't. He'd offered the girls and me a place to stay. He'd given us dolls and pretty dresses. He'd apologized. That wasn't enough to earn my trust.

Nikkos didn't realize all I'd given to them already. How far I'd come in being able to trust them after what those mountain men had done. Had I been foolish to trust these mages with my heart? With my body?

And yet, would the elements match me with mates who meant to harm me? None of them had ever tried to force

themselves on me. Then again, they knew what would happen if they tried.

I hung my head in my hands, cursing myself for being so cynical. Nikkos and Blaze had both been honest with me so far. Perhaps worry about my safety had driven Nikkos to pressure me. He'd been poisoned by a demon, after all, and now there was a new threat from possibly hostile mages. And what if Malvolia's army came here? Would I expect my mates to fight her mages for me? To die for me? How long would my siren voice be able to hold back her army?

I feared my only option would be to join her army, or else risk not just my mates' lives, but the girls' lives, too. And it would be easier to stand against our foes if Draevyn and I could mind-speak.

Shoulders sagging, I realized I'd been too hard on Nikkos. Perhaps he was right to want me to bond with Draevyn. I couldn't deny the pull I felt toward Draevyn was sometimes too maddening, and my traitorous body wanted nothing more than to rip off our clothes and straddle him. And maybe that was the root of my anger, that my body wasn't listening to my mind. I shouldn't want to bond with a mage who'd threatened to drop me, no matter how many times he'd apologized. Yet, I wanted him in the worst way, my desire for him sometimes robbing my mind of reason. I cursed my foolish heart. I would have to make up with Nikkos soon, but first, I had to drive all thoughts of Draevyn from my mind.

* * *

Draevyn

After flying around the battlements and checking in with my guards, I flew around the castle for good measure, eyeing the forest for any signs of Sol and Bertram and the missing nurses. I'd already sent men to follow the giants' retreat, making sure they didn't decide to turn around. They had only just returned, their wings tired from the flight, but at least they reported the giants had gone over the mountains. After doubling the guard and sending a search party to find the nurses, my forces were stretched too thin. Yet I had to find those nurses, so I sent out a

second search party, which meant I had less eyes on the battlements. Where had those nurses gotten those demon herbs, and why would they want to kill my baby brother?

I flew past Shirina's balcony, nodding toward Blaze who leaned against the open doorway, a somber look in his eyes. Was that look because of the news we'd received today, or was something else troubling him? I hated to pull him away from Shirina, but he and Nikkos would need to relieve the watch tonight. I was just waiting for the right moment to tell them, fearing Shirina would think I was trying to separate her from her mates.

I flew over the balcony leading to the nursery and halted when I heard squeals coming from inside. I landed on the balcony and strode through the doors, not surprised to find the girls standing on top of an armoire, howling like little wild wolves. It was much too tall for them to have climbed up, which meant Aurora teleported them there. Mrs. Euphemia had her hands pressed to her fuzzy cheeks, a panicked look in her eyes while she begged them to come down.

"Girls," I said as I flew up to them, "are you being good for Mrs. Euphemia?"

They gaped at me, their eyes wide with shock—and fear. That wouldn't do. Though I supposed they had good reason to fear me after the way I'd treated them in the past.

Mrs. Euphemia looked up at me, plastering on a smile. "I'm afraid they've grown restless, My Lord."

Restless. Her endearing term for wild, uncontrollable heathens. She'd described my brothers and me as 'restless' enough times for me to know what she really meant.

I yelped, my wings faltering when they suddenly appeared below me. Elements. This teleporting would take some getting used to.

"Why can't we go in the garden?" Aurora asked me.

"You can once it's safe," I answered as I landed, ruffling my wings and pretending they hadn't just scared the feathers off me. "Right now, it's safest inside."

I got a good look at the girls this time, recognizing Aurora with the shorter hair and Ember with the longer hair. Ember also clutched a porcelain doll to her chest. Even though the doll already had a sagging arm that appeared to have been pulled out of socket, she was vastly superior to Ember's previous raggedy doll.

Ember pouted. "Uncle Blaze and Uncle Nikkos were supposed to play hide-and-seek with us."

I forced a smile. "And I'm sure they will." Though maybe not. Why would they ever want to leave Shirina's bedchamber? I know I'd never want to leave if we were bonded. I pretended I wasn't upset that my mate refused to even look at me, much less invite me to her bedchamber.

Aurora tugged on my wingtip. "Will you play with us?"

I scratched the back of my head. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at hiding."

"That's okay," Aurora said with a squeal, clasping her hands together. "We'll hide, and you find us."

"Well..." I gave Mrs. Euphemia a helpless look, hoping she'd offer me a way out. "If your nursemaid says it's okay."

She stumbled to a rocking chair and fell into it with a sigh. "It's more than okay, My Lord."

"Very well." I heaved a frustrated breath. I had a castle to run. I didn't have time to play nursemaid. Then again, I probably owed the girls this, a way to redeem myself after my earlier behavior, and Mrs. Euphemia clearly needed a break. I forced a smile. "Tell me what to do."

The girls shared a look, and I wondered if they were telepathically speaking. I'd heard that twins sometimes had that ability.

"Haven't you ever played hide-and-seek?" Aurora finally asked.

"I suppose Blaze and I did when we were very little." Though I didn't remember.

Mrs. Euphemia cleared her throat as she leaned forward and poured herself a cup of steaming tea. “Lord Inferni became Lord of the Manor when he was seven and didn’t have time for games after that.”

Ember slipped her hand in mine, looking up at me with glossy eyes. “That’s so sad, Uncle Drae.”

I smiled at her, stroking her smooth cheek. I had no idea how these little sprites had managed to worm their way into my heart, but I didn’t think I could ever get tired of them calling me Uncle Drae. If only their aunt would warm up to me the way they did, though I couldn’t fault Shirina. Children forgave easier, and I’d given Shirina plenty of reasons to stay angry.

“We’ll teach you how to play again,” Aurora said.

“We’re very good at it,” Ember added.

I laughed at that. “I bet you are.”

“Cover your eyes and count to ten very slowly,” Aurora said, “and when you’re done, you come find us.”

I wrapped myself up in my wings. “Like this?”

The girls giggled. “Yes. Like that.”

When Mrs. Euphemia gasped, I peered at her through my feathers. “What is it?”

Her mouth twisted in a scowl as she heaved herself from her chair. “I’ve told them no more teleporting, but they did it again.”

Flames of dread raced through my veins. They wouldn’t leave the castle. They knew better, didn’t they? “Well, they couldn’t have gone far, right?”

“No. Not too far.” Mrs. Euphemia jutted her hands on her hips, spinning a circle around the nursery. “Princess Aurora can only teleport to places she’s seen before.”

Places she’s seen before? Holy flames, that could be anywhere! “It won’t take me long to search the castle.” I had a feeling they were in the dining room or the kitchen, wherever

they could get access to tarts. “Why don’t you wait here for them?”

The nursemaid bowed, though her face was still pinched tight. “Yes, My Lord.”

Chapter Nineteen

Ember

Ember gasped when she landed on soft dirt. A chill swept through her bones when she saw they weren't just outside the castle, but on the other side of the castle walls standing in front of that big river their uncles called a moat. Even worse was that it was almost dark. The fireflies had come out, swarming the sky like hundreds of little floating stars. She recognized this section outside the castle walls. She'd seen it that first night she and Aurora had been stuck up on that turret. Though it had been poorly lit, Ember and Aurora had wolf-touched vision and could see in darker spaces. Why did Aurora bring them there?

She released her sister's hand and spun toward her. "We can't be outside."

"But it's pretty here." Aurora picked up a stone and tried to skip it across the moat, but it sank with a *thunk*. She turned and waved her hand through a swarm of fireflies, laughing when they danced around her head.

Ember followed after her sister as she skipped across the embankment. "Rora, we'll get in trouble."

Aurora turned on her with a laugh. "Don't be such a scaredy sprite, Em."

Ember crossed her arms, Bethamy number two flailing with the movement. Her arm had come loose, and Mrs. Euphemia had yet to fix it. "I'm not a scaredy sprite." She stomped her foot, angry with her sister for being so dumb.

"You are." Aurora turned up her chin, jutting a thumb in her chest. "I'm brave like Auntie and our uncles."

Ember was so mad, her eyes practically crossed. "You're not being brave. You're being stupid."

Aurora made her even more mad when she laughed and skipped away toward a patch of tall grass. But then she stopped, letting out a terrified scream. Ember chased after her

sister. She didn't need to guess what had made Aurora upset, for she saw the two spirits hovering over their lifeless corpses. The bad nurses who had treated Uncle Nikkos. She plugged her nose at the stench as she frowned at the flies swarming their decomposing bodies.

Their spirits blinked in and out, and though they didn't speak, she recognized the warning in their bulging eyes. Danger was near.

Aurora stumbled back, her jaw slackened from shock. "What happened to them?"

"They crossed the wrong mages," a deep voice bellowed.

Ember spun around, crying out when a strange winged mage snatched her and jumped into the air. She kicked and screamed, smacking his chest with her doll as they rose higher and higher until they were almost above the treetops. Her heart shattered and tears sprung to her eyes when he snatched Bethamy from her, and her doll turned to ash in his hand.

"Well, well, well. Who do we have here?" The mage flashed a wicked grin. He didn't look like her uncles. He had short hair and a missing ear. Even scarier was the red in his eyes and the dark aura that encompassed him.

Ember's friends blinked in and out. *Demon!* they warned her.

"Let me go!" She struck him again, and he laughed and laughed.

Aurora screamed below as another mage chased her into the nearby forest, swooping down like a hawk about to snatch up a mouse.

"Go get help, Aurora!" she screamed.

Aurora disappeared behind a bush of thick brambles, and the mage landed hard in the dirt, swearing.

He jumped into the sky, snarling at the mage who held Ember. "I'm not going after her in there." This mage looked even scarier, with an ugly, jagged scar that dissected his bald head and wings that looked like shredded sails.

“Yes, you are!” the other mage commanded, clutching Ember so hard, he hurt her bones. “Go!”

The other mage swore and grumbled before swooping back to the ground and lighting the entire bush on fire. Ember screamed and screamed, tears streaming down her face. What if Aurora hadn’t gone for help? She’d be burned up like her doll!

The demon mage hauled her up against him, his rotten breath making her gag. “You look just like an Avias. Are you related to the bitch who killed Mantus?”

“Let me go.” She’d never been so terrified in her life as she squirmed in his grasp. “You’re hurting me!”

He growled in her ear like an angry dragon. “Who’s your mama?”

She angled away from him, her heart racing so fast she thought she’d die of fright if he didn’t drop her first. “Let me go! Auntie! Uncles!”

* * *

Draevyn

I swore after searching all over the castle. Where could they be hiding? I had a foreboding feeling as I looked under the dining room table and saw it was empty. I flew back out to the grand hall. My heart filled with dread as I called for the girls, met with only my own voice echoing through the atrium. When I heard the sound of a child weeping coming from the nursery, I flew into the room, nearly barreling into Mrs. Euphemia, who held Aurora against her chest.

The child had sticks and leaves in her hair. Damn. They’d gone outside against my orders!

“Where is her sister?” I asked the nursemaid.

Her eyes were as round as saucers. “I-I don’t know. She just popped in a second ago.”

I grasped the child’s shoulders, tempted to throttle her, but I knew that would get us nowhere. “Aurora, where is your sister?”

Her lower lip trembled as she pointed to the window. “The bad men have Em!”

Fuck. I pulled her from Mrs. Euphemia’s arms. “Take me there.”

It took me a moment to get my bearings. One moment we were in the nursery, and the next we were outside the safety of the castle walls, staring at two fire mages who had their backs to us while they set the brambles on fire. The sun had almost finished setting, casting them in shadow, but I didn’t need to see their ugly faces to know who they were. White-hot rage shot through my veins when I saw one of the mages held a squirming child in his arms.

I was going to kill them.

“Go get my brothers,” I whispered to Aurora before setting her down.

She swallowed, nodding toward her sister. “Not without Em.” Stubborn child. She was too much like her aunt. Too much like me.

I didn’t have time to argue with the child, and I prayed she’d be able to get her sister. I’d lose my mind if anything happened to the girls. Gritting my teeth, I flew fast at my adversaries, landing softly on the ground and hitting their backsides with streams of fire, careful not to hit Ember. Hopefully, if I shocked them, Ember would be able to get away. The mages spun around, roaring, and Ember fell from Bertram’s arms, crying out before she scrambled behind me. I had only a moment to look behind me as Ember and Aurora blinked out like a snuffed candle.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Bertram?” I seethed, sparks shooting from my palms.

He shook embers off his wings with a snarl. “I would ask the same of you.”

I forced a laugh. “Is this what you’ve been reduced to, terrorizing children? Too afraid to fight me instead?”

His nostrils flared, and he reminded me of a dragon preparing to charge. “At least I’m not fucking the enemy.”

I charged him with a roar, knocking him on his backside. Sol came at me, and I easily knocked him back with my flame. They'd never been good fire mages, more spark than flame. One reason why I believed they loathed my brothers and me, always picking fights with us, always trying to make us look bad in our queen's eyes. The other reason could've been that their estate was a quarter the size of ours, their mansion practically in ruins, their fields fallow, and their personal army just a handful of rejects.

Bertram blinked up at me as I wrapped my hands around his throat. "She's not our enemy. She's *our mate*."

Laughter gurgled up from his throat, his eyes narrowing. "Our queen will turn you all to ash."

Sol came at me again, this time wielding a bow and flaming arrows. I jumped from Bertram as an arrow whisked past my head, grazing my ear.

"For what exactly?" I asked as I flew just above Bertram, turning arrow upon arrow to ash as Sol fired at me with unnatural speed. Red flashed in his eyes, and not the normal deep crimson typical of fire mages, but a bright, unnatural red that somehow made me think of the flames of hell.

Bertram stood, ruffling the dirt off his wings and scowling up at me. "Did you kill Flora and Derrick?"

"None of your fucking business," I seethed after turning the last of Sol's arrows to ash. Sol swore and threw down his bow, then disappeared into the forest. Coward.

Bertram jumped into the air, hovering just above me, a sneer etched into his features. "You were supposed to kill them and deliver their daughter to our queen."

"Our assignment changed," I spat, my flames at the ready. "I'm sure our queen will understand when we explain what happened."

Bertram's eyes narrowed. "What happened?"

"Again, none of your fucking business!" I bellowed, taunting him with my flame. "I answer to the queen, not you."

He threw back his head with a laugh. “Oh, you’ll be answering to her, alright.”

I jutted a finger toward the forest behind us. “Get the hell off my estate.”

Bertram crossed his arms, leveling me with a dark look. “I’m not on your estate.”

“This is all Abyssus property.” I threw my arms wide, taunting him with a triumphant glare. “Unlike your sorry manor, our domain extends for miles.”

His eyes narrowed, and I swore I saw dark clouds leaching from his skin like ink spilling into water. “Not for long.”

I let out a low growl, then screamed, dropping from the sky when my back was set on fire. Sol! I thought he’d flown away, but he must’ve snuck up from below. I’d been too focused on Bertram to notice. I hit the ground hard, too hard, my bones cracking and pain shooting up my legs as I let out an agonized roar. I was able to slow time long enough to curl into a ball, wrapping my wings around myself before more flames hit me. But I was too distraught, in too much pain to try to do more. Elements, they were going to kill me! I couldn’t let that happen. I needed to protect my brothers and Shirina.

With a roar, I managed to slow time long enough to stumble to my knees and fight fire with fire while ignoring the searing pain. If I was going down, they were coming with me.

* * *

Shirina

After wiping the tears from my eyes, I finally heaved myself off the floor, dreading having to face my mates. But it had to be done. I was ashamed of my reaction to Nikkos after he only wanted to protect me. I checked my face in the mirror. My eyes were swollen and bloodshot, but there was nothing to be done. I combed my fingers through my hair, doing my best to look somewhat presentable. And then I stood at the bathing room door for far too long, gathering the courage to face Nikkos.

After heaving out a breath, I opened the door.

Nikkos jumped from the bed and flew to me, his wings drooping when he reached me. “Shiri.” He had a stricken look in his eyes as he reached for me and then pulled back. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I grasped his hand, doing my best to push out the words through a constricted throat. “I know you’re only looking out for me. I’m sorry for my reaction.”

“You had every right to react the way you did. I won’t try to persuade you to bond with Drae again. Okay?”

My eyelids fell shut when he tenderly stroked my face. I threw my arms around him, nuzzling his neck. “Hold me.”

I sighed in his embrace as he held me tight, warming me with the fire in his veins.

“Everything okay now?” Blaze called from the balcony.

I looked up at him through hazy eyes and nodded.

He flew toward me, the breeze ruffling his mop of hair. “Good,” he said as he wrapped his wings around Nikkos and me. “I don’t like it when we fight.”

“Neither do I,” I answered as the three of us hugged again.

Then I shuddered in their arms, a sudden burst of nausea nearly overwhelming me as a foreboding feeling threatened to split my chest in two, and I swear I heard Draevyn cry out in my mind.

I pulled back, gaping at my mates. “Something’s wrong.”

Mrs. Euphemia threw open the door and raced into the room. She bent over, clutching her stomach while struggling to catch her breath. “Master Draevyn needs you!”

Aurora and Ember suddenly appeared. Their dresses were torn, and Aurora had leaves and sticks stuck in her hair.

“Auntie!” Ember lunged toward me, tears streaking down her face. “We couldn’t find you!”

Nikkos lifted her into his arms. “What’s wrong?”

Aurora smeared snot across her face with the back of her hand. “The bad men are killing Uncle Drae!”

Blaze’s eyes flashed with fire as he picked her up. “Take us there!”

Nikkos and I latched onto Blaze. One moment we were in my bedchamber and the next, we were in a dark field outside the castle walls. Aurora had done it! She’d transported all of us!

I spun around when I heard a shout. Two scrappy-looking winged fire mages were flying straight for us, their glowing eyes even more pronounced against a dusky sky as flames arced off their hands.

I threw out my hands, my siren voice feeling more powerful than ever as it rang across the field and shook the very air like a burst of thunder. “Stop!”

The mages fell from the sky like birds with clipped wings.

Blaze and Nikkos left the girls with me and flew after the fallen mages. My heart leapt into my throat as I looked around for Draevyn. Where was he? I grasped the girls’ hands and we hurried through the grass. I gasped when we nearly tripped over two bodies that had been hidden in the tall grass. I panicked at first, a scream dying in my throat, when I thought Draevyn was among them. Then my blood turned to ice as I recognized the nurses’ lifeless eyes. No wonder Draevyn’s guard hadn’t found them, but who killed them? The fallen mages?

Nikkos and Blaze hauled the mages up by the backs of their wings, snarling while shaking them. “Where’s our brother?”

The mages had burns all over their bodies, and one was even missing an ear. They looked at me with wide, frightened eyes, their limbs limp. Wow. I’d no idea I could immobilize them with just one word.

“Where is Lord Draevyn?” I demanded, my voice reverberating my very bones.

Both mages nodded toward the tree line behind us.

“You will stay here, and you will not move,” I said to them, my words feeling like weights falling off my tongue.

I turned to Aurora, my siren voice still strong. “You will take your sister to Mrs. Euphemia, and you will wait for us there. Understood?”

She nodded, taking her sister’s hand and disappearing. I heaved a sigh as Nikkos helped me stand. At least they were safe in the castle. I had a feeling I wouldn’t want them to see Draevyn’s condition.

We found Draevyn, or what was left of him, by the tree line. A sob caught in my throat, and my knees buckled as I fell beside him. He was burned beyond recognition. Even his feathers had been turned to ash, leaving nothing but bald and bleeding wings. But even worse was his face, which resembled a melted ball of wax. Holy elements! They killed him! They killed my mate! My mates let out agonized roars, beating their chests. The cry that tore from me was something otherworldly as I fell on top of his body.

And then his charred corpse let out a moan. I jerked back, gaping at him. “He’s still alive!” I gave Nikkos a pleading look. “Please!” I cried, desperation robbing my mind of all reason. “Please help him!”

Nikkos fell beside his brother and held out a hand to me. “I need your strength. I need your siren.”

I nodded my understanding and took his hand while sucking in a deep breath, summoning every ounce of my magic from deep within my soul. “You will heal your brother,” I commanded, my words coming out like the blare of a battlefield call. “You will heal Draevyn.”

Nikkos released my hand and fell on top of Draevyn.

My hands flew to my mouth when both their bodies lit up with brilliant blue fire. They burned like a pyre for several tense minutes before the flames finally died down. I let out a strangled sob, my shoulders sagging with relief when Nikkos rolled off Draevyn, and I saw his body and face had been restored.

Nikkos draped a hand across his brow, letting out a moan, and Draevyn laid too eerily still upon the grass.

Blaze grasped my shoulder. “It took a lot of magic to heal him.” He gently kissed my brow. “They just need rest.”

I clung to him, sobs wracking my body. Elements, we’d almost lost Draevyn, and I’d never gotten the chance to bond with him. So many questions ran through my mind. What were he and the girls doing out here? I had a sinking feeling Aurora had teleported outside the castle walls and Draevyn had tried to save them.

Great goddess, I didn’t think I could ever repay him for his sacrifice.

After heaving a shuddering breath, I pulled out of Blaze’s arms. I nodded toward the mages still sitting in the grass. “Were those Malvolia’s mages?” Draevyn had warned us about them, but I’d forgotten their names.

“Bertram and Sol.” Blaze dragged a hand down his face with a groan. “Malvolia’s personal mages.”

Damn. “What should we do with them?”

“There’s not much we can do.” He grimaced. “They were probably sent by the queen herself.”

No doubt they attacked Draevyn as retribution for his failure to kill my parents. This was all my fault.

I threw up my hands. “So we should just let them go?”

Blaze rolled his shoulders and cracked his knuckles, his mouth splitting in a fanged grin. “After I rearrange their faces.”

I turned away, kneeling beside my sleeping mates when Blaze flew toward Bertram and Sol. I winced every time I heard Blaze roar as he kicked and punched them. I cringed when a line of fire mages flew toward us, but Blaze didn’t seem to be concerned as he kept beating his adversaries. The mages landed beside Blaze, and I recognized a few of them as Abyssus’s guards. It was about time they showed up.

After Malvolia's mages let out several cries for mercy, I finally stood, waving to Blaze. "We need to get your brothers inside."

The sun had finally set, and the moon looked far too big, far too bright. A strange howl sounded from somewhere in the forest.

Blaze had a stricken look when he came to me. I clasped his face, kissing away his tears, clinging to him when he swept me into his arms. The other guards grabbed Nikkos and Draevyn and followed us to the castle. It was then I knew our lives had taken a dark downward turn, and this attack was just a prelude to the bigger danger to follow.

Chapter Twenty

The guards brought Nikkos and Draevyn to Draevyn's opulent bedchamber. It was decorated in a far darker fashion than my bedchamber, with rich mahogany furniture. The bed was big enough for all four of us with tall bedposts and crimson velvet drapes. After the guards had left Nikkos and Draevyn in the bed, Blaze and I shared one more kiss before he said he had to go to the battlements. As the second-born son, he was acting Lord of the Manor until Draevyn recovered. I shuddered to think Blaze had almost been named Lord of the Manor, and that Draevyn had only been a few breaths away from death.

Mrs. Euphemia brought the girls to me. I kissed their boo boos and inspected them for anything serious, relieved they only had a few scratches. Mrs. Euphemia had already bathed them and put a poultice on their cuts. Aurora confessed she'd deliberately defied Draevyn's orders and teleported her sister outside. The girls told me Bertram and Sol had captured Ember, and that Draevyn had almost given his life to save her—for surely he would've died if Nikkos hadn't reached him in time.

I thought about lecturing Aurora but decided to wait until the morning. I knew they were too terrified to leave the castle again. I was just relieved they were safe, and I had a feeling Aurora had learned her lesson.

I kissed the girls once more before Mrs. Euphemia took them away for their bedtime. Then I sat by my mates' bedside, keeping vigil while they slept. I suddenly realized that I'd thought of Draevyn as my mate. I didn't know how that happened, but the thought of mating with him didn't seem so horrible now. After fatigue threatened to pull me under several times, I finally surrendered to sleep and crawled into bed between Nikkos and Draevyn.

I awoke to the sound of wings fluttering and looked into Nikkos's eyes illuminated by the overhead candlelight.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, running my fingers through his hair.

“Tired, but good.” He grasped my hand, kissing my knuckles. “How are you?”

“Relieved. Worried. Tired.” I sat up, looking down at Draevyn who still slept.

Nikkos turned his gaze to his brother. “He looks healed.” He slanted a smile. “Thanks to your bossy siren.”

I laughed. “And your healing magic.”

He shrugged. “My magic was a fraction of the strength it is now thanks to you.” His lips brushed my knuckles again as he peered up at me with those sweet, sensual eyes. “You make me a better mage.”

I cupped his cheek, kissing his full lips. “And you make me a better siren.” When he let out a low growl, I knew we would have to contain our desire before I straddled him next to his sleeping brother. “You should probably eat something,” I said, backing away from Nikkos. I knew healing magic took a lot of energy.

He grasped my hand when I reached behind me to ring for the servants. “It’s late. Don’t bother the servants,” he said. “I’ll go to the kitchens.”

“You sure?” I was concerned about those dark circles under his eyes. He needed more rest.

“Yeah.” He dragged a hand down his face. “Where’s Blaze?”

“The battlements.”

“I’ll join him after I eat.”

I understood his unspoken words. Bertram and Sol were just the start of bigger threats to come.

I swallowed back my fear. “Will Malvolia come here?”

He grimaced. “I have no doubt she will.”

My stomach churned with unease. What would she try to do to them when she found out they didn’t kill my parents? What would she try to do to the girls and me? And what would

I have to do to stop her? After searching his gaze, I finally found the courage to speak. “What will we do?”

“Whatever we do, we will decide together.” He clasped my hands. “You look tired. Get some rest.”

My eyes fluttered, and a soft moan escaped my lips when he stroked the side of my face and kissed my cheek. I instantly missed his warmth when he got up from the bed, and though I didn’t want him to go, I suspected why he left me alone with his brother.

After he left, I checked Draevyn’s pulse and wiped crusted blood off his forehead and wings while adjusting his blankets. I stilled at the sound of hooves clomping outside the door.

Then came the knock, and Mrs. Euphemia poked her furry head inside. “How is he?”

I waved her into the room. “Still sleeping,” I said while smiling down at him. He certainly was handsome, with a warm complexion and features that looked like they’d been carved from granite. He was slightly taller than his brothers with broad shoulders to accommodate his large wingspan. I briefly wondered if a certain appendage matched his wingspan, but I was confident it did. Then I berated myself for my crude thoughts while fighting the urge to look beneath the blankets.

Mrs. Euphemia sat in an oversized rocking chair beside the bed, her shoulders sagging as she leaned back.

“The girls?” I asked as I sat up against the headboard, crossing my legs.

“Sleeping,” she answered. “I will return to them shortly.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.” I never knew we needed a nursemaid until Mrs. Euphemia, but she’d proven to be an invaluable addition to our family, giving me time to become familiar with my mates while keeping the girls entertained. Even though I adored the girls as if they were my own children, it felt nice to get a break and have some adult time.

She offered me a warm smile. “They are a joy.” She blew out a long breath. “Even if they wear me out.”

I laughed at that because I knew exactly what she meant.

Mrs. Euphemia stood, frowning down at Draevyn sleeping beside me. “He doesn’t look like he was badly burned.”

I nodded, then swallowed back my emotion. “He was a lump of coal.”

“His skin looks so smooth.” Mrs. Euphemia beamed. “Nikkos’s healing magic must’ve grown stronger.”

“It has.” I swiped a tear from my eye while frowning down at Draevyn. “But there’s something my father never explained to me about fire mages.”

“What?” she asked as she sat back down.

“How can they withstand their own fire, but not someone else’s?” They had fire in their blood, fire in their eyes, and elements knew they were as warm as hot cinders. Why would they not be able to withstand another mage’s fire?

She shook her head. “I’m not sure why their own fire doesn’t harm them but other fire does.”

Draevyn rolled over, the blankets falling off his chest and revealing thick muscles and those swirling fire tattoos. It took all my willpower not to run my fingers along his heated skin.

I looked up at Mrs. Euphemia when she cleared her throat. She’d pulled back her sleeve, revealing those same violent scars Draevyn had shown me the first day I’d met her. “When Queen Malvolia’s healers tried to heal me, I refused to let them erase all the scars. They serve as a reminder for all I’d lost.” She visibly swallowed, her eyes flashing with pain.

My chest tightened with emotion. “I’m very sorry,” I rasped.

“Why?” She began rocking in her chair, the floor creaking with the movement. “It wasn’t your fault. You, the girls, and the young Masters Inferni are all innocents caught up in this. Did your mates tell you about my husband?”

“No.” I froze at the mention of a husband. I had wondered what had happened to him and why she wore a black dress and veil.

“He was my fated mate, and he was not a satyr.” She gave me a pointed look. “Everyone in my family was against it. Bjorn was considered the lowest of the Terrae, a bear shifter.”

“A bear shifter? I had no idea they existed.” I had only ever heard of wolf shifters.

“They have been hunted to near extinction, loathed and scared by humans and Fae alike.” Her mouth flattened into a grim line. “I will admit, even I hated my mate at first. I fought the bond, cursed the elements for choosing Bjorn as my mate. He was a brute.” She made a strange sound that sounded like a cross between a laugh and a wail. “He had terrible manners. But Lord and Lady Inferni took him in, made him the Warden of the Forest, gave him a sense of purpose, but most importantly, they treated him with dignity. And he repaid their kindness with loyalty and bravery, defending Abyssus with his life.”

I swallowed at that. Somehow, I feared what she was about to tell me would shatter my heart. Still, I leaned forward, intrigued by Bjorn’s story.

“It took me a while to accept the bond,” she continued, shaking her head and clucking her tongue. “Too long. I’m ashamed to say I wasted years fighting it. After I finally surrendered to my heart, I spent the happiest two months of my life in our little cottage in the forest. I remember the night we saw the castle on fire. He begged me to stay in the cottage, but I refused to leave his side. I rushed with him into that burning tower to save the boys. He didn’t come out with us. The entire tower would’ve fallen down on our heads, but he shifted into a mighty bear and held it up long enough for me to escape with the boys in my arms.”

I was unable to stop the flow of tears that spilled from my eyes. My chest felt as if it had been cleaved in two. Poor Mrs. Euphemia.

“I do not regret loving him,” she continued, her eyes glossy with unshed tears, “but I do regret waiting so long to do it. I could’ve had three extra years with him if it hadn’t been for my stubbornness.” She paused, giving me a look of understanding. “And, yes, he was a brute, but he softened with me, for me. He gave his life to save the children and me. Some days I miss him so much, I pray to the elements to take me. If it wasn’t for the boys needing me, I think I would’ve already thrown myself from the tallest tower.” She stopped rocking, fisting her hands in her lap. “And now the girls give me a renewed sense of purpose. I think Bjorn led you and the girls to us. I will be here for them as long as they need me, but when the elements call me to be with Bjorn, I will not fight it.”

I could barely see through my flood of tears. Had she shared this story a few days ago, I might have thought her purpose was to shame me into mating with Draevyn. Now, I realized she was right. I had no idea how much time my mates and I would have together. Malvolia’s mages could take them from me just like they’d killed my other father. Would I waste what little time we had together quarreling, or would I use that time to reconcile with Draevyn and finally seal the bond? Draevyn had already apologized, and he’d proven himself worthy of my love by sacrificing himself for the girls. I didn’t know what else he could do to prove his devotion.

“Thank you for sharing that with me.” I paused, searching for the right words, though nothing could bring back her mate. “I’m so sorry about Bjorn.”

She smiled and looked away, her eyes awash with distant memories.

Another knock sounded at the door, and two young women servants came inside carrying trays of supplies, a water basin and several towels, plus bars of soap.

They both curtsied to me.

“Excuse me, Your Highness,” one of the servants, a young woman with wavy dark hair and pale skin said while bowing her head. “We’re here to clean Lord Inferni.”

“Oh, leave it.” I waved them off. “I’ll clean him.” No way was I trusting anyone else to take care of Draevyn after what the nurses had done to Nikkos.

“Are you sure you don’t need help?” the servant asked.

“No,” I answered curtly, giving her no room for refusal. “I don’t need help, thank you.”

Mrs. Euphemia got up as the servants left the trays on a nearby table. “I’ll leave you to your cleaning,” she said with a wink.

My skin flushed as I looked lovingly down at Draevyn. Yes. I would be the one to clean my mate. My brave, selfless mate who, despite all his flaws, nearly sacrificed his own life to protect my nieces. I would never forget that.

* * *

Draevyn

I woke to the soothing feel of a warm, wet sponge wiping my brow. I released a moan when I felt gentle hands on my wings. My nostrils flared as I recognized her scent—Shirina, my mate. I watched her from beneath my lashes as she carefully cleaned my feathers. Had I died and gone to heaven? For I swore I could feel her love for me in each gentle stroke. I didn’t want her to know I was awake, for selfish mage that I was, I feared she’d stop cleaning me, but I also worried she’d notice the growing evidence of my desire soon enough. How could I not be aroused by her gentle touch, or by her delicious ripe breasts hovering over my face while she stretched across my body to reach my wingtips. Elements, I wanted to roll her over and plow into her.

I dug my fingers into the blankets, a moan escaping my lips. “Uhh.”

“Draevyn?” She rolled off me. “Are you awake?”

I swallowed, blinking up at her while willing the evidence of my desire to recede. Luckily, she hadn’t noticed, or else she didn’t acknowledge that she’d noticed.

I slowly sat up, doing my best to adjust to the overhead candlelight that pierced my eyes.

She steadied me with a hand on my elbow. “Don’t sit up too fast.”

I hung my head in my hands with a groan as I felt her weight dip and then heard her slip off the bed and pad across the floor. Was she leaving me?

“Here.” I peered up at her as she handed me a drink. I downed the goblet of cool water in a few swallows and handed it back to her. She refilled it and bade me drink again. Then she wheeled a cart to the bed and began scooping food onto a plate.

“I can’t eat yet,” I said, trying to push the food away.

“You can and you will,” she said sternly. “It took a lot of energy to heal you. You need to replenish.”

Suddenly, memories came racing back. Sol and Bertram! The fire! The girls!

I clasped my aching chest. “The girls?”

She smiled, holding a bite of food out to me. “Sleeping.”

“They’re not hurt?” I asked as I swallowed the food, hardly registering the taste as I got lost in the amber swirls of her beautiful eyes.

“No.” She dabbed the corner of my mouth with a napkin. “They’re fine.”

“It’s late,” I said as she shoveled another bite into my mouth. “Why aren’t you resting?”

Her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Someone has to take care of you, since we can’t trust the nurses here.”

I ate in silence while wondering if that distant look in her eyes was because she’d rather not be with me or something else. After I’d eaten half the plate, I pushed it away. “I’ve had enough for now but thank you.” I didn’t want to waste my time eating when I had my beautiful mate’s company. I wanted

to cherish this time together, for however long she was willing to stay.

She took the plate away, and I leaned back in bed, memories slowly returning. I'd fought them for as long as I could. It hadn't been the first time I'd exchanged flames with the brothers, but something in their fire had changed. Their flames were more virulent, almost poisonous.

"I remember being badly burned." I looked at my hands. The skin was smooth and clean, no signs of injury. "How?"

She sat back down beside me, gently wiping crumbs from my mouth. "Nikkos's magic has grown stronger."

I couldn't tear my gaze from my beautiful mate. She was being so kind. Had she finally forgiven me? I leaned toward her, intoxicated by the lavender scent wafting off her skin. "Because of you."

Her cheeks colored, and she looked away. "Maybe."

"Not maybe." I took a chance and reached for her hand, relief sweeping through me when she didn't pull away. "You're a blessing to us, Shirina. Before you, he wouldn't have been able to heal me. I would be dead by now."

She hung her head, her face flushing. "Before me, Malvolia's mages wouldn't have attacked you."

"Those fools." I forced a laugh. "It was only a matter of time before they found some excuse to come after us."

When she looked back up at me, her eyes were glossy from unshed tears. "The girls could've been killed or captured, and you defended them knowing you could die, too."

I reached for her, pulling her into my lap, so pleased when she didn't pull away. I cupped her chin, forcing her to look into my eyes. "I would die for them. For you, too, Shirina."

She flattened her palm against my chest but didn't say anything. For a moment, I wondered if I'd gone too far by pulling her into my lap. I didn't want to drive her away. I cleared my throat. "I don't need a nurse anymore if you want

to be with my brothers.” I forced out the words, even though it felt like I was driving a dagger into my own chest.

She draped her arms around my shoulders, solar flares flashing in her eyes. “What if I want to be here?”

I stilled while looking into her eyes, fearing my heart would beat out of my chest. Had she finally accepted the bond? “I would not send you away, even though I know I don’t deserve your kindness.”

She nodded. “A group of mountain men tried to rape me.”

My world came to a standstill with the exception of my pulse pounding loudly in my ears and the fire racing through my veins. “W-what? When?” I would turn them all to ash.

She averted her gaze. “It was shortly after my parents told me Tari had been killed by a bear. They said they buried her body, and it was too gruesome to dig up. I didn’t believe them. Tari was a green witch. Animals loved her.” She gave me a hopeless look before turning her gaze down. “It made no sense that one would kill her, so I ran away from my parents in search of her. I was only gone a week before the mountain men found me. There were at least a dozen of them. I tried to fight them off, but they were too strong. I had no choice but to use my siren’s call.”

I swallowed back bile, rage and flame pulsing through my veins. “I hope you killed them, because if not, I’m hunting down every one of them.”

A tear slipped down her cheek. “I made them slit their own throats.”

I gritted my teeth. “Good.” Though some part of me wished they were still alive, so I could cut off their dicks and shove them down their throats.

“Good?” Her voice cracked as more tears spilled over her eyes. “I used my magic for evil.”

Clasping her shoulders, I desperately searched her eyes. “You used it for protection.”

She hunched over, as if the weight of her imagined sins were too heavy to bear. “I’d been using my power of persuasion my whole life, for an extra slice of pie or for my mother to sing us another song. She never said ‘no’ to me. My siren’s call didn’t develop until I was on the cusp of womanhood, and I only used it jokingly on Tari then or to chase away annoying suitors. My voice hadn’t been very strong, not until that night.” She paused, releasing a shuddering breath. “I don’t know if it was fear that awakened my magic, but a dam burst, and my veins have been humming with power ever since. I never told my parents what happened. I was so afraid they’d think I’d turned evil.”

I dug my fingers into her shoulders. “You’re not evil.”

“I feel like my whole life they’ve been watching me, waiting for me to turn out like Malvolia.” She wiped tears from her eyes. “The way they would look at me, as if I was a venomous serpent waiting to strike.”

“Look at me.” I cupped her chin, desperately searching her eyes. “You’re not evil.” I swallowed back my sorrow, forcing out the words through a tightened throat. “You’re absolutely perfect, and I’m sorry, Shirina, it took me too long to see it.”

The light in her smile was enough to drive away the shadows in my blackened heart. “Shiri.”

It took me a moment to comprehend what she was saying. She wanted me to call her by her familiar name. Did this mean she was ready to accept me as her mate? “Shiri?” I tenderly stroked her face, my dick hardening when she let out a sensual moan.

Desire swirled in her eyes. “Yes?”

“Does this mean you forgive me?”

She crooked a half smile, draping her arms around my shoulders again. “Just kiss me.”

I didn’t wait for a second invitation. My lips came crashing down on hers, hungrily, greedily. She tasted like sweet wine and felt like heaven in my arms as she melted into me with a moan. Elements, I’d never desired anything so badly in my life

as much as I wanted to sink into her wet heat. Knowing what she'd been through, I tried to hold myself back, but it was so very hard.

Despite the flames racing through my veins, I forced myself to pull away, panting against her mouth. "Shiri, if you don't stop me now, I don't think I'll be able to stop."

"Then don't stop." She nibbled my bottom lip, her hands roving across my chest, across my back, and then my sensitive wing tips.

Wait. She *wanted* me to make love to her? "Are you sure?" I asked, still in shock this was happening. Shiri *wanted* me!

"Yes." My scalp tingled when she coursed her fingers through my hair. "Please, yes."

That was all the encouragement I needed as I flipped her over with a growl, salivating as she untied her robe, freeing her beautiful, full breasts. I couldn't help myself. I had to feast, licking each peaked nipple, scraping them with my teeth as they hardened and then taking as much of each breast in my mouth as would fit, sucking while she writhed beneath me. She arched her back, giving me better access to her tempting body. I kissed her narrow waist, her flared hips, before lavishing each breast again and then feasting on her long, smooth neck, her soft lips, my tongue diving into her mouth, probing her while she moaned, her hands roving across my body. My wings twitched when she loosened the string on my trousers, setting my cock free. I jerked in her hand when she wrapped her fingers around me.

Fearing I'd explode, I grabbed her wrist. "Shiri," I whispered while kissing her again and again before trailing kisses across her jawline. "I'm barely holding back here."

Her sensual laughter skidded across my bones, setting my skin on fire. She wrapped her legs around my buttocks, looking up at me with a seductive smile, her lips swollen from my kisses. "Then don't hold back. Take me."

I lowered myself onto her, my cock sliding across her slick sex, warm and swollen and ready for me. Captivated by the

desire swirling in her eyes, I watched her face as I slid into her tight entrance, inwardly smiling as her desire turned to shock when I slid in deeper and deeper. Gasping, she lifted her legs higher to accommodate my girth. I wrapped her in my wings and rocked into her, rolling my hips while pounding her dripping flesh. Her wet, tight heat was pure bliss, and I never wanted to stop making love to her. We soon found our rhythm. Panting into each other's mouths, we moved together as one, reaching for that peak until I thought perhaps I *had* died and found heaven in her arms.

She clawed at my back, her sheath tightening and swelling as I moved faster, plowed her harder, sweat dripping down my brow and between my wings. And then she cried out, arching beneath me while she spasmed. I couldn't hold on another moment, bathing her slick sex with my seed as I stilled with a roar, my cockhead pulsing like a heartbeat. But I wasn't finished with my amazing mate. I never wanted this night to end, so I continued to rock into her, taking us both to heaven again and again while being consumed by the flame.

* * *

Shirina

I laid in my mate's warm embrace, using his broad chest as my pillow, the sound of his steady heartbeat in my ear a balm to my soul. He was alive, and he was all mine! A smile etched into my face and a trill raced across my spine as he stroked my back with his wingtips. His touch was pure heaven. I would've been completely content to lie here in his arms the rest of the day, but there was one thing bothering me. I was able to mind-speak Blaze and Nikkos, but not with Draevyn.

He tenderly kissed my forehead while holding me tight. "What are you thinking, Shiri?"

I sat up, straddling my mate, my hair falling across his chest while I looked at his handsome face. Candlelight flickered around us, illuminating the flames in his eyes. I moaned, my head rolling back when he gently cupped my breast, his rough thumb brushing across my nipple. Was he ready to make love again?

I bit my lip when he gently kneaded my other breast, causing my sex to swell and drip. Even though we'd made love most of the night, I wanted him so badly already. "You'd know if we could hear each other's thoughts," I finally answered.

Both thumbs swirled around my peaked nipples, making that aching spot between my thighs pulse like a heartbeat. "We didn't take each other's blood."

"I know how it works," I said while batting my lashes. "Mind-speaking is part of what makes being a fated mate so special."

His eyes darkened. "It is, but I understand if you don't want to complete the bond."

I swallowed at that, suddenly overcome by a bout of nerves. "Do you want to bond with me?"

His smile was brighter than a thousand suns. "More than anything."

I sucked in a gasp and then slipped my thumb into his mouth, wincing when he pierced it with the tip of his fang. He suckled the blood like a babe drawing milk from his mother's breast, and then blood pooled around his bottom lip when he bit down on it. I kissed him, tasting the coppery tang of our blood on my tongue.

Panting against his mouth, I finally pulled back, projecting my voice through thought. *Draevyn, can you hear me?*

Yes, my love, he purred, his hand slipping between my thighs. *Please call me Drae. We should be on familiar terms now, don't you think?*

Then tell me something about yourself, Drae, I said, *since we're on familiar terms.* After all, I'd told him about my darkest, most painful memory. It was only fair I learned more about him.

His hand stilled on my thigh. *You know how Nikkos can heal and Blaze can fly fast?*

Yes, I answered.

He heaved out a breath. *Sometimes the world stops.*

What?

It happens randomly. He dragged a hand down his face, pain flashing in his eyes. *I can't always control it. Sometimes time just stops.*

I scooted closer to him, placing my palm on his chest. *I don't understand.*

When Sol and Bertram attacked me, I was able to slow time long enough to shield myself with my wings and to strike back. They would've burned me to ash if not.

Oh. I breathed out a shaky breath, my heart twisting at the thought of Drae turned to ash. *What about when Blaze punched you?*

He slanted a smile. *I didn't try to shield myself then. I knew I deserved it.* He tenderly stroked my face. *I'm sorry, Shiri.*

Don't be. I pressed up against him, savoring his warmth while staring into his darkened eyes. *That's all in the past now, Drae.* My inner voice was breathless as I felt his hard length pressing into my abdomen. *Will you make love to me again?*

He rolled me over with a dark growl. *I thought you'd never ask.*

Chapter Twenty-One

I woke up to the midday sun streaming through the heavy drapes covering Drae's big, soft bed. I loved it so much in this bed. The sheets were soft, like smooth moss, and the pillows were so fluffy. But most important was the ravenous mage who occupied the bed. His sexual appetite last night had been insatiable. I rolled over when I felt his body heat pulsing behind me, surprised to be looking into Blaze's dark eyes.

Good morning, Shiri, he said through thought, flashing a lazy grin while he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. *Everything okay?*

Everything is perfect. Biting my lip, I rested my hands beneath my cheek. *Where's Drae?*

He went to the battlements, he said with a frown. *You'll have to settle for me.*

I sat up, kissing the tip of his nose. *I never have to settle when I have you. You know that,* I scolded. How could he even suggest that?

His lips brushed mine. *I know. I was just teasing. He said he'd return to you soon.*

Mm. I nibbled his lower lip as I looked down the length of his body, noticing that he was very naked and very hard. *What shall we do to pass the time?*

When he rolled onto me, his wings wrapped around us, I had my answer.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, my hands roving his hard chest as he kissed me deeply.

I haven't brushed my teeth, I said to him.

He flexed his hips, his smooth shaft rubbing across my cleft, causing it to swell and drip. *I don't care.*

I melted against him, surrendering to his heat as he continued to glide across my aching sex until I thought I'd go mad from the torture.

Blaze, please, I need you, I cried out in his mind.

You always have me, he purred, and then slid inside, slowly, agonizingly, until I thought I'd combust from need.

I dug my nails into his shoulders, our gazes locked, the love reflecting in his eyes making me melt beneath him as he rocked into me.

I cried out when his hand found my breast, pinching and pulling the nipple and sending euphoric sparks shooting through my entire body. I matched each of his thrusts, raising my hips and taking him deeper while we soared higher and higher toward that precipice of bliss.

Blaze, yes, my love. Yes! I called out in his mind as my climax finally hit like a punch to the chest, holding me captive while he pumped into me twice more and then stilled with a roar. His thick cockhead pulsed inside me like a heartbeat, causing me to climax again and again. I clung to him, riding out each wave with a moan of pleasure.

He rolled over much too soon, so I rolled with him, refusing to let him pull out. He dug his hands into my hips with a growl, his wings spread out beneath us while I ground against him, slowly at first, but then I rode him harder and faster, panting as he thrust his hips into me. I knew I'd be sore later, but the pressure of his large cockhead battering my womb was too glorious to stop. My eyes rolled into the back of my head when he latched onto my breasts, rolling my nipples between his fingers. The climax that shot through me went off like cannon fire, the intensity taking me by surprise. He stilled with a curse, his cockhead pulsing in me again.

By the time I fell on top of his chest, gasping for breath, we were both slick with sweat and our juices. He laughed at the mess and tried to clean us both with a sponge, but halfway through we realized the sheets were ruined, and we were both in need of a bath.

He carried me to the bathing room and warmed a shallow bath for us. We splashed and soaped each other up, and then I ended up riding him again, his wings draped over the tub, our bodies splashing in the water.

I regretted nothing when he helped me from the tub. Between Nikkos and Drae's injuries, I'd not focused enough time on Blaze. And after kissing away his tears last night, I knew he needed this.

He cupped my face in his hands, brushing his nose across mine in the sweetest display of affection. *Thank you, my love.*

I grasped his wrists and stood on my tiptoes to kiss him. *It was my pleasure, darling.*

Shiri.

Yes? The intensity in his eyes nearly took my breath away.

His eyes flashed with something. Was it pain? Despair? *I've only known you a week, and I've already fallen in love with you.*

I wrapped my arms around him, holding him close to my heart. *Oh, Blaze. I love you, too.* So much that it frightened me, and I understood that look of despair in his eyes, for the world was burning around us. How did we keep from getting consumed by the fire?

Come. He took my hand, flashing a smile that didn't hide the worry reflecting in his eyes. *Let's find something to eat. I'm sure you're hungry.*

I clutched my roiling stomach. *Famished.*

* * *

The servants had brought a buffet into Drae's bedchamber. So much food that I didn't know where to start. I was so overwhelmed, I let Blaze make me a plate. We sat at a table set for four by the hearth, though, according to Blaze, Nikkos and Drae were still on the battlements. Draevyn had ordered the guards double the watch and he and his brothers would take turns in command, which meant I wouldn't get to make love to all three at once. Selfish and insatiable as I was, I couldn't deny that had been my fantasy. I supposed I should've been grateful when most Fae never found their fated mates, let alone three.

Breakfast was delicious, from savory pies to stew and potatoes with buttery onion gravy. I ate every bite and then had seconds. There was no way we could finish it all, though, and I wondered if the food would go to waste or if the servants would finish it. Back at our cottage, a meal like this would've lasted my family a week. Not that we'd ever had food this good. The realization made me resent Malvolia for forcing us into hiding, into poverty. My sister and I never had porcelain dolls, fine clothes, full bellies. I was determined that things would be different for Ember and Aurora from now on.

"How are the children?" I asked Blaze in between sips of sweet juice. I felt a little guilty that I hadn't thought of them this morning. Mrs. Euphemia had taken over so many of my motherly duties. Maybe too many. Tari had entrusted the girls to me, not to anyone else.

"Fine," he said with a wink. "I stopped in the nursery on the way to you this morning."

"Oh." I slouched in my chair, feeling even worse that everyone else had been looking after them while I'd been neglecting them.

"Mrs. Euphemia is teaching them their letters this morning."

I forced a smile. I should've been happy for them that they were learning to read, though I felt guilty I wasn't the one teaching them. Tari and I had been taught by our mother. Our father had collected enough tattered books and parchment over the years. Our mother had prioritized us having reading materials over luxuries like tea and sugar.

"You okay?" Blaze eyed me while he took a long sip of coffee.

I shrugged. "Just thinking about the girls."

He reached across the table, taking my hand in his. "They're fine. They have a loving nursemaid. You have nothing to feel guilty about."

"How did you know?"

He flashed a sideways smile, starlight shining in his eyes. "I could read it on your face."

I smiled back. "You know me so well already."

"How could I not?" He squeezed my hand. "You're my fated mate."

I didn't think I could be more content than I was at this moment. The world was burning around us, and yet I was finally living the life of a pampered princess inside the safety of a beautiful castle with three gorgeous, virile winged mages.

"Something strange happened last night," Blaze said as he released my hand and leaned back in his chair.

"What?" I asked while pulling apart a sweet cinnamon roll. Cook's pastries truly were heavenly.

Blaze leaned forward and snatched a piece of my roll, popping it in his mouth. "My brothers and I can mind-speak."

My mouth fell open. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, he's serious." The fluttering of wings sounded on the balcony and then Nikkos strode in through the double doors, a wide grin splitting his face.

I jumped from my seat and ran to him. He swept me into his arms, kissing me passionately. I was breathless and his eyes shone with fire by the time we pulled away.

Then his gaze wandered toward the pile of destroyed sheets at the foot of the bed. *Someone had fun in here*, he said through thought, his voice echoing like a gong while he wagged his brows.

Odd that our telepathic conversations had never sounded like that before.

Blaze looked sideways at me, flashing a wicked grin. *So much fun*, his voice reverberated in my skull the same way.

I gaped at them. We were having a group thought conversation.

Nikkos laughed. *You look like you've seen a ghost.*

Sorry. I shook my head. *Just getting used to this.*

Yeah. Blaze scratched the back of his neck while sharing a smirk with his brother. *Us, too.*

I jumped from my chair at the sound of little feet running outside the sitting room door. The knob rattled but I didn't hear the door open. I laughed. After last night, I supposed Aurora had been afraid to use her teleporting abilities again.

Nikkos smirked and crossed over to the sitting room, opening the door.

The girls came running in. "Auntie! Uncles!"

"Good morning," I said to them, kneeling on the floor and holding out my arms.

Nikkos cleared his throat. "Good afternoon."

"Oh." I squinted up at the noonday sun as I squeezed the girls tight, kissing their soft cheeks.

Blaze knelt down beside us. "Have a good sleep, sprites?"

Ember pulled back, frowning. "I had a nightmare about the bad men."

"Come here, sprite," Nikkos said as he joined our circle.

I fought back tears as she went to him and he took her in his arms, wrapping his wings around her.

Thank you, I said to him through thought while swiping the moisture at my eyes. I was truly a lucky witch to have such kind mates.

I frowned down at the doll she held against her. This one had pale hair and skin like a Sidhe Fae. "You have a different doll," I said to her.

Ember sucked her thumb while looking at me with watery eyes.

"The bad man burned up Bethamy Two." Aurora jutted a finger toward her sister's doll. "That is Bethamy Three."

"Oh." I clasped a hand to my heart, thankful the bad man had destroyed the doll and not my niece, but also so very

fearful to know he was capable of so much evil. Next time, I feared he would try to harm one of my nieces. The thought was like a flaming poker stabbing my chest.

I stroked Ember's cheek. "I'm sorry about Bethamy Two."

She sniffled, a tear sliding down her cheek. "Me, too."

"Where's Mrs. Euphemia?" I asked them.

"It's her family time," Aurora said.

"I forgot about family time." Nikkos looked disappointed as he dragged a hand through his hair. "Mrs. Euphemia always takes off Sunday and Wednesday evenings to visit her aunt in the village." He gave me a forlorn look, and I realized he'd been hoping for a turn between the sheets with me.

Later tonight, I said to him through thought. I'll make it worth the wait.

He wagged his brows. *I know you will.*

I turned at the sound of fluttering wings behind us, my heart nearly beating out of my chest when Drae landed on the balcony, a large bouquet of flowers in his hands. He strode through the door with the swagger and grace befitting the Lord of the Manor. My lord. My mate.

I jumped to my feet, drawn to him like a moth to flame. He took me in his arms, pressing the flowers to my back, and kissed me so deeply and so thoroughly, I could scarcely draw breath. I was panting by the time he released me, and I wanted nothing more than to drag him back to that big bed.

"Good morning," he murmured in my ear. "Have a nice sleep?"

"Mm," I whispered back, nibbling his ear. "The best."

He chuckled and handed me a bouquet of multicolored flowers. That's when I noticed the one large bouquet was actually three, two small ones and a bigger one. He knelt beside me and handed a smaller bouquet to each of the girls. His smile was as bright as the bouquets. "Flowers for my favorite girls."

The children squealed so loud, my mates and I had to cover our ears. They twirled with their flowers while stroking their silky petals.

I kissed Drae's cheek. "That was a sweet gesture. Nobody has ever given them flowers before."

"I'm happy to be the first." He tenderly stroked my face, his eyes shining with the brilliance of a thousand suns. *I mean to be a good role model for them*, he said through thought, his voice lacking that echo, so I knew he was speaking solely to me. *So when they grow up and find their mates, they accept nothing less than to be treated like the princesses they are.*

There were no words to convey my gratitude, so I kissed him instead, giving him a look that promised another night of passion.

"Any news?" Blaze asked.

Drae nodded toward the sitting room attached to his bedchamber.

"Girls, why don't you play with your flowers by the hearth?" He pointed toward the hearth in the opposite direction. "It's warm there, and there are tarts on the buffet."

Flowers forgotten, they ran to the buffet and tried to lift the heavy silver lids.

Nikkos crossed over to them and gave them each a tart on a small plate. He then poured them each a goblet of juice and sat them at the table. He affectionately patted their heads. "Eat here, then you can play with your flowers when you're finished."

"Yes, Uncle Nikkos," they both said as they sat in their chairs. They daintily tucked cloth napkins into their frocks and used their silverware to cut into their tarts. Where had these young ladies come from and what had happened to my heathen nieces?

I must've been gaping because Blaze leaned over and whispered in my ear. "Table manners were the first thing Mrs. Euphemia taught us, too."

I took his arm, and he led me into the sitting room. Drae went to a big mahogany buffet server and poured us each a goblet of wine. I thought it was a little early to drink, but then realized by the grim look on his face that he had unsettling news.

Blaze and Nikkos sat on either side of me on a wide leather sofa. Draevyn sat across from us, his brow creased with worry. He took a long drink of wine before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “The nurses were found dead in that field not far from where the mages attacked.”

“I know. I saw them. Do you know how they died?” I asked.

He grimaced. “Their necks were broken.”

Blaze tensed beside me, squeezing my knee. “Who?”

Drae blew out a breath, leaning back in his chair. “I have a suspicion it was Sol and Bertram, though I can still hardly believe it.” Shadows darkened Drae’s features as he dragged a hand down his face. “They’ve always been dragon’s asses, but I never knew they were capable of such evil.”

Nikkos cleared his throat. “They were shocked when they saw me. They looked at me as if I was a ghost.”

Drae nodded. “They didn’t expect you to be alive.”

I swallowed back a knot of panic as realization struck me like a mallet to the head. “They were behind the poisoning.”

Blaze shook his head. “But how did they get demon herbs?”

“Because they’re demons,” a little voice squeaked behind us.

I looked over the back of the sofa at Ember who stood in the doorway. She had an intelligence in her eyes that made her look far older than four years.

Drae slowly stood, his feathers standing on end. “How do you know this, Ember?”

She pressed a palm into the wall, her doll hanging in her other hand. “They smelled like demons, and I saw their darkness.”

“Holy elements,” I breathed, clutching my throat. “H-how do you know what demons smell like?” I stammered.

She walked up to me. “My friends told me what demons should smell like.”

“Friends?” Drae asked.

She’s a spirit talker, Nikkos told him through thought.

Drae’s eyes widened.

By her friends, she means the ghosts that follow her. I added.

Drae blew out a long breath. *This is getting interesting.*

“And what should they smell like?” I asked her.

She made a face. “Like troll dung.”

“Oh.” Nervous laughter escaped my throat. I took her on my knee, kissing the top of her head. To be so young and have such dark magic. It must’ve felt more like a curse than a gift, and yet she was the sweetest child.

Blaze jumped from his seat, his wings ruffling as he swore under his breath. “I should’ve killed them when I had the chance.”

“And risk Malvolia’s wrath?” I asked.

Blaze shrugged. “But they’re demons.”

“Would Malvolia believe us if we told her that?” Nikkos asked.

I tensed, watching Drae for his reaction. I knew how highly he thought of his queen. His shoulders fell. “I’m not sure if she’d believe us, especially not after...” He paused, visibly swallowing as he glanced at me.

“Not after you mated with her enemy?” I was unable to keep the bitterness from my voice.

“Please don’t say that.” Drae knelt in front of me. “You’re not her enemy, Shirina. You’re *our* mate.” There was no mistaking the flames in his eyes as he pressed his lips to my knuckles.

I threaded my fingers through his, my cheeks suddenly heating as I got lost in the fire in his eyes. Then I watched out of the corner of my eye as Aurora tiptoed into the room. She giggled when Nikkos snatched her in his arms and kissed her cheek.

You said Sol and Bertram are Malvolia’s lovers? I asked through thought so that the children didn’t hear, projecting my voice to all my mates. How odd that speaking to all of them at once felt like second nature, as easy as breathing. I didn’t need to conjure a spell to do it. I simply thought about projecting, and it worked.

They were at one point, Blaze answered back through thought, grimacing. *I’m not sure if they are now. Our queen discards lovers like old shoes.* Averting his gaze, he refilled his wine goblet, his mouth still turned down.

I was suddenly struck by a disturbing thought as I gave each of my mates a pointed look.

No, we were never her lovers, if that’s what you’re thinking, Drae answered, laughter ringing in his words. *She was like a mother to us, nothing more.*

Good, I grumbled. *I don’t think I could stomach the thought of you sleeping with my aunt.*

My mates had the nerve to laugh out loud.

The girls gave us funny looks.

“I don’t know how demon possession works,” Drae said aloud as he stood and went to refill his wine, “but hopefully, they haven’t infected her, too.”

The color drained from Nikkos’s face. “That would be bad.”

I swallowed at that, casting Ember a nervous glance.

“Really bad,” Blaze added.

I suppose if and when we ever came face-to-face with Malvolia, Em could tell us if our aunt was a demon. *It would explain why she'd gone mad*, I wanted to say, but kept that thought to myself.

* * *

After the girls finished their tarts, we walked them back to the nursery where I intended on playing dolls with them while Mrs. Euphemia was away. I shared looks with my mates after we walked into the nursery. We still hadn't had 'the talk' with the girls, and I supposed now was as good a time as any.

We set them on their bed, and I knelt in front of them, wiping crumbs from their faces. "I hope you haven't been driving Mrs. Euphemia crazy."

They shared a long look, and I knew they were telepathically speaking, probably trying to get their stories to align.

"We've been good," Aurora finally said. "Mrs. Euphemia's face only turned red twice."

I heaved a sigh. I didn't know what Drae was paying Mrs. Euphemia, but I was certain she deserved a raise. "I'd prefer her face didn't turn red at all." I grabbed their hands. "Now before we go play, we must talk about what happened yesterday."

Ember looked up at Drae, her bottom lip quivering. "Uncle Drae, thank you for saving me from the bad men."

He knelt beside me, kindness reflected in his smile. "You're very welcome."

"Aurora, is there something you'd like to say?" I rubbed her knee, giving her an encouraging look.

She vehemently shook her head. "No."

I gritted my teeth. Why did I think this would be easy? "You left the safety of the castle walls without permission or an escort after you were told not to do that."

"I told Aurora to take us back," Ember said, "and she called me a 'scaredy sprite.'"

Aurora gave her sister a sharp look, then turned her gaze to the smooth satin bedspread beneath her legs.

“Aurora, do you understand that Uncle Drae almost died saving you girls?” I asked.

“Yes, Auntie.” She sniffled then looked up at Drae with wide eyes. “I’m sorry, Uncle Drae.”

“Come here, child.” I swore I heard my heart sigh when he took her in his arms and sat on the bed with her. “Listen to me.” He wiped a tear from her cheek. “I’m not angry with you. I was very worried, though. If anything happened to you girls, it would break your auntie’s heart.” He swallowed as he looked at me. “And all our hearts, too.”

Nikkos and Blaze murmured their agreement.

Aurora nodded as more tears slid down her face. When Drae rocked her in his arms, I didn’t think I could adore him more than at that moment.

Ember tugged on my sleeve.

“Yes, sweetheart?” I asked her.

Her brows drew down in a serious yet adorable expression. “I saw my mommy and daddies.”

“What?” I gasped, looking over my shoulder as if Tari could materialize. “Where?”

“They’re not here,” she said, frowning while playing with the frayed end of her doll’s sash. “I saw them when the bad fire mages tried to take us. They were upset. They heard us cry out.”

My mates and I shared bewildered looks.

What’s she talking about? Blaze asked through thought.

I don’t know, I answered before turning back to Ember. I gently grasped her knee. “Tell me.”

“Papa Asher was in a cave and Mama and Papa Finn were in a field of flowers. She had a black rabbit, and these tiny little people were stealing the fruit out of her basket.”

I smiled. "I think you had a dream."

"It wasn't a dream." She clung to her doll while leaning forward. "And Mama had weird hair that looked like straw and pale skin."

My mates gasped, and I remembered Nikkos telling me Tari had pale hair and skin. Had Ember heard him?

I smiled at my niece. "Then how do you know she's your mama?"

She blinked at me, her eyes wide and innocent. "My friends told me she was my mama. And two big black birds were guarding them."

"Black birds?" Certainly this had to have been a dream.

"But they didn't have feathers." She made a motion with her hands, as if she was stretching out her chin. "They had long faces with sharp fangs and smooth skin."

Dræ cleared his throat. "She described wyverns."

"And the little people were gnomes," Blaze added.

I gave my mates funny looks. "Gnomes?" My mother had told us a fairytale with gnomes once. I had thought they were only make believe.

Dræ rubbed Auora's back as she buried her face against his chest. They were so sweet together, I just wanted to imprint this image on my memory and never forget. It suddenly occurred to me that my most favorite people in the world were all right here with me, crowded around this pretty canopy bed. All we needed were Tari and her mates for our family to be complete. Not my parents, though. It saddened me that I couldn't trust them.

"The only gnomes I know of are on Thesan," Dræ finally said.

Wait. Did they believe Ember? Elements. What if her vision hadn't been a dream? Realization slowly dawned. Great goddess, Ember's powers extended beyond being able to speak to the dead. She had the gift of sight! Fear and dread coursed through my veins. Malvolia would want to use her for her

army if she ever found out, just like she'd want to use Aurora's gift to sneak up on her enemies.

"But the wyverns inhabit Fallax, not Thesan," Nikkos said.

"Unless they followed Tariana, and she can control wyverns." Blaze cleared his throat, and I detected the undercurrent of fear in the rattle of his words. "Just like Maiadra." My mother had told me the long-dead goddess, Maiadra, had been the last witch to be able to control the wyverns. Did my sister's magic know no limits?

"My father said he heard a rumor Helian took his brothers to Thesan," I said, recalling the fateful night I'd read his mind and had decided to flee with my new fated mates. To think, it had only been a week ago we'd fled my parents, but so much had happened since then, it felt like a lifetime.

"They were heading to the Fallax Islands when we saw them," Drae said as he stood with Aurora in his arms, "but they could have gone up the island chain and gone on to Thesan."

Aurora sat on his hip and sucked her thumb while resting her head against his chest. I didn't think I could love Drae any more than I did at that moment. Elements, it just dawned on me that I loved this Fae and had yet to tell him.

"Where do you think they'll go next?" Blaze asked Drae.

"If Helian is with them," Drae answered, "he could negotiate a truce between King Fachnan and the wolves."

"No!" The word punctured the air as it came out of me, reverberating with my siren's call, though I knew it wouldn't work from here. I hadn't meant to lose myself, but I couldn't imagine my sister allying herself with that monster, not after all the shifters he'd killed, women and children included.

Drae gave me a look of pity. "If the girls' fathers are still alive, your sister might be more willing to side with the king."

"They're alive!" Ember blurted, beaming. "I saw our daddies."

Aurora pulled her thumb out of her mouth. “I hope they’re as nice as our uncles.”

“Me, too!” Ember said as she clutched her doll to her chest.

My nieces’ love for my mates warmed my heart. My mates beamed at the girls, and Aurora giggled when Drae tickled her shoulder with the tip of his wing.

I sat by Ember, stroking her hair and kissing her temple. “I’m sure they are. How can anyone not be nice to my sweet cherubs?” Then I gave Drae a pointed look. “I still refuse to believe Tari would side with Fachnan. Not after what he did to all the other shifters. You saw Adrean.”

Nikkos crossed his arms, scowling. “She might have no choice but to choose the lesser evil if Malvolia’s mages keep pursuing her.”

I held my breath, waiting for my other mates to scold Nikkos. Their younger brother had called their queen evil, and yet they said nothing in her defense. Had my mates finally accepted that she could be evil? That she might have been the reason for their parents’ deaths?

“So what you’re saying is, in an attempt to stop the prophecy from happening, Malvolia will force it?” I asked them.

Drae’s features hardened as he grimly nodded. His brothers nodded, too.

This was huge that they’d acknowledge their queen was at fault. That they would believe my sister and I were innocents caught in the middle of a war that others had created.

I squeezed Ember’s side. “Did you see anything else, sweetheart?”

She frowned. “No.”

Nikkos knelt beside her, offering her a kind smile. “Could you tell us more about your friends?”

She ran her fingers through her doll’s silky hair. “Like what?”

He visibly swallowed before sharing a look with his brothers. “What are their names?”

“I don’t know all their names,” she said softly, her cheeks coloring, “but they’re nice.”

I stroked her cheek, feeling to blame that she was being so shy now. This was my fault for dismissing her imaginary friends all these years. “You don’t have to feel embarrassed, Em. You told me their names were Kylar and Isabeau.”

“Yes, but those are my old friends.” She rested her head against my side, batting her lashes. “I don’t know my new friends’ names yet.”

“Are they spirits?” I pressed.

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

What if they’re our parents? Nikkos’s question reverberated in my mind.

That’s what I’m thinking, I answered. *They might be able to tell her who killed them.*

“Are they dead?” I asked her sweetly, trying not to push her too hard for fear she’d refuse to answer my questions.

She blinked up at me. “They didn’t tell me.”

I forced a smile, trying to sound as unaffected as possible. “Ember, if you come across Lord and Lady Inferni, ask them who killed them.”

“Okay,” she said, stroking her doll’s hair again. “There’s a pretty lady with a ruby necklace.”

Blaze shared a quizzical look with Drae. “I don’t remember our mother wearing a ruby necklace.”

“Neither do I,” Drae said as he set Aurora back down when she began to squirm. “We have no ruby necklaces in our vault. Our mother preferred emeralds.”

“And by the way, Shiri”—Blaze winked at me—“all the jewelry is yours now.”

His brothers voiced their agreement.

All what jewelry? I wanted to ask, though I supposed it didn't matter, anyway. All I cared for was a safe home for the girls and me.

"Thank you," I said, "but I have no need for jewelry."

"Why not?" Drae asked as he knelt beside me, his eyes lighting with fire. "You deserve to dress like the princess you are."

I bit my lip, heat flushing my face as I was tempted to kiss him.

"Auntie," Ember interrupted, tugging on my sleeve. "My new friend told me to tell you to look behind the dragon tapestry in the attic."

A chill swept up my spine. "When did she tell you this?"

She went back to playing with her doll's hair. "When we were playing in the nursery."

Shadows fell across Drae's features as he stood, holding a hand down to me. "Let's go."

I swallowed, taking his hand, though he had other ideas. He handed Ember over to Nikkos and swept me into his arms. The girls giggled as Nikkos and Blaze carried them into the atrium and we flew to the top of the domed glass and then disappeared into a little door beneath one of the massive rafters. We ended up in a dark, narrow hall. Drae set me down and pushed open a low door. We emerged in a dark, dusty room filled with all kinds of chests and paintings. We worked our way toward the back of the room, to a beautiful tapestry of two sleeping dragons hanging in the back. Drae lifted the tapestry off its hook, revealing a hole in the wall. He dug into the hole, pulling out a dusty book.

Scowling, he walked away from us, shaking out the book before reading the imprint on the leather. "The History of the Monarchy by Flora Avias."

I gasped. My mother wrote it?

Drae looked down at Ember. "Did your friend say why she wanted us to find this?"

Ember pointed to me. “She said it’s for Auntie.”

“Oh.” I took the book from Drae. “Tell your friend ‘thank you.’”

“Okay.” She swung her doll while smiling up at me. “Can we have a sweet?”

“Yeah,” Aurora pleaded. “We’ve been good all morning.”

“Didn’t you just have tarts?” I asked them while clutching the book. The old leather crackled in my grip.

The girls exchanged a look.

“We didn’t finish them,” Aurora answered.

I laughed. “Then let’s go finish.” That would give me time to look through this book, and maybe try to understand why Ember’s ghost friend wanted me to have it.

What about me? Nikkos asked through thought, wagging his brows. *I want a tart.*

I covered my mouth to stifle a laugh. Somehow, I got the feeling he was talking about *my* tart. My mate was incorrigible. *You’ll get that tart after we’re alone.*

Chapter Twenty-Two

After grabbing a few more of the girls' toys, we returned to Drae's bedchamber, since his room was the biggest. The girls played with a set of wooden blocks in the sitting room while I draped my legs over the side of a big, padded chair and read through the book given to me by Ember's 'friend.'

What I discovered was profoundly shocking, a completely different account of what my parents had told me. It made no sense that what my mother had told me about our family history would be so different from her book.

Drae sat beside me, holding out a goblet of wine. "Well, anything useful?"

Closing the book, I sat up and took the goblet. "I'm confused more than anything."

"Why?"

I took a long sip of wine. It was mildly fruity with a hint of citrus. "This history says the Avias line always bears twin girls who usually rule together."

"Okay," he asked, "what's confusing about that?"

"There's nothing about how one sister is good and the other is evil." I bit my lip, trying to reconcile this history with the opposite account I'd learned from my parents. "It says that for thousands of years my ancestors ruled peacefully until a period called 'The Dark Tide.'"

He arched a brow. "We've heard of it. I wonder if our account is different from the book."

"A dark mage stole the throne from my great-grandmother and her sister. He slaughtered everyone except for my mother and aunt. He didn't know about my mother's face shifting magic. She and Malvolia shifted to look like the servants, and they hid in the sewers beneath the castle for weeks. With the help of a mage named Selig, my aunt snuck in on the dark mage and defeated him when she was just fifteen and restored order. Then later my mother was betrothed to King Fachnan,

but she broke it off when she mated with two dukes who ruled their own province off the eastern coast.” I fanned the book’s pages. “There’s nothing in here about Malvolia and my mother fighting over the throne. My mother says she willingly gave up the throne to marry the dukes.”

“Maybe she and the dukes wanted more.”

I scowled at Blaze as he stood in the doorway between the two rooms. “But what if they didn’t?”

Drae looked at me a long moment, though his eyes lacked censure. “Are you saying Malvolia made it all up?”

“I don’t know what I’m saying.” I tossed the book on a nearby low table. “None of this makes sense. I once overheard my parents saying one sister was always evil and one was always good, but the book she wrote says they were all good queens who ruled together peacefully.”

Drae spoke to me through thought. *Your parents thought you were the evil one.*

Fighting back tears, I looked away.

That’s why you hid your siren voice from them, Blaze said as he sat beside me and took me in his arms.

I didn’t answer as I buried my face against his chest and let the tears silently fall. Had my parents been lying all this time? If so, why? Why would they let me believe I was evil? That Aurora would one day turn evil, too? My parents might have made some terrible choices, but they’d never struck me as intentionally cruel. Maybe there was some other reason for the discrepancy, a more sinister reason. The thought was like a rush of venom to my soul.

* * *

I read that book most of the day, so much that my eyes were practically crossing by evening. So many stories of my ancestors, all twin witches with unusually strong magic, which was why they ruled Delfi. And all of them had been kind and fair rulers. I still didn’t understand why my mother would want to murder her own sister for the throne that she had voluntarily abdicated. I couldn’t imagine trying to overthrow

Tari, or Ember and Aurora turning on each other in such a way. None of it made sense.

Mrs. Euphemia still hadn't returned from visiting her family, so the girls continued to play in Drae's sitting room. The sun was starting to set, and I was tired of straining my eyes in the low candlelight. I finally put the book down, looking across the room at the girls as they happily played by the hearth, sharing toys and giggling together. My gut twisted and my heart felt like it was imploding as I imagined them turning on each other when they grew up—one sister ordering the death of the other and her unborn children, too.

Drae and Blaze had gone to the battlements, leaving Nikkos with us. He sat quietly in a chair opposite me, giving me the space and time I needed to absorb the words in the book.

But I'd had enough of that book, so I slowly stood, my stiff bones creaking with the movement, and went to Nikkos, curling up in his lap.

He kissed my forehead, speaking to me through thought.
You okay?

I shook my head. *Hold me.* I hadn't been this depressed in a long while. I felt as if I was drowning in my sorrow. I sighed when he held me tight, his warmth seeping into my bones.

After heaving a deep sigh, I sat up and wiped my eyes. I was about to ask Ember a few questions, but I paused when I heard wings outside. Drae and Blaze came into the room, their hair windswept as they tucked their wings behind them.

Everything okay? I asked them through thought.

So far, Drae answered as he kissed my cheek.

No sign of Sol and Bertram, if that's what you're wondering, Blaze said as he went straight to the server with the wine. He poured me a goblet of wine, but he poured an amber-colored liquid into small glasses for his brothers and himself.

Drae leaned against the wall, one ankle crossed over the other. "Learn anything new?" he asked while nodding toward

the book.

I grimaced. “I have more questions than answers.” I shifted in Nikkos’s lap, leaning toward Ember while clasping my goblet in both hands. “Em,” I called to my niece. “Why did your friend want me to have that book?”

Ember looked up at me as she was brushing her doll’s hair. “Because she wanted you to know the truth.”

“Where is your friend now?” I asked her.

“She’s here,” she said sweetly.

“Em’s friends are always with us,” Aurora added, seemingly unconcerned that they were followed by ghosts as she stacked blocks in a row, making a fortress that looked much like the shifter stronghold.

I shared nervous looks with my mates before plastering on a smile for Ember. “Can you please ask her some questions for me?”

Ember shrugged. “Okay.”

I swallowed back my nerves as I prepared to ask the first question. No turning back. I had to know the truth, even if I wouldn’t like the answers. “Ask her if she thinks your grandparents are evil.”

Ember shook her head. “She says, ‘no, Flora and Derrick aren’t evil.’”

I released a shaky breath. “She knew Yaya and Pappo?”

Ember nodded. “She knew them.”

I set down my goblet, my hands trembling as I prepared to ask her the next question. “Ask her if Malvolia is evil.”

Ember fluffed her doll’s skirts. “She says ‘no.’”

Drae uncrossed his ankles, his eyes blazing as he slowly walked toward Ember. “Ask her if she knows who killed Lord and Lady Inferni.”

“She knows,” Ember said as she pretended to make her doll drink from an empty miniature teacup.

A bolt shot through me as I clutched Nikkos's arm. "Who killed them, Em?"

Ember squinted up at the ceiling. "Huh?"

Was she talking to the ghost? Was it hovering above my nieces? All moisture evaporated from my mouth. I could hardly think, much less speak.

"What is she saying?" Drae demanded, his voice coming out on a harsh whisper.

"I don't know." Ember scrunched her face. "I don't understand what she means."

Drae knelt beside her, his eyes wild as he took her hands. "Just repeat to us what she's saying."

Ember looked at him. "Mind spinner."

My world fell out from beneath me, and I was falling into the abyss.

Drae looked to me, his face contorted in pain. "Mind spinner?"

Nikkos tensed beneath me. "The mage who changes memories?"

"His name is Thorin," I said, somehow finding my voice.

Ember nodded. "She said 'yes.'"

I took a sip of wine, hoping to quench my parched throat. "Em, what's your friend's name?" I tensed, holding my breath.

Everyone had gone so eerily still as Ember squinted up at the ceiling, I could've heard a feather drop in the room.

Bile projected into my throat when Ember looked at me. "She says it's Chara."

"Our mother?" Blaze blurted.

Nikkos swore, clenching my waist.

Drae jumped to his feet, his wings trembling as he paced the floor. "Ember, this isn't funny."

“Drae,” Blaze scolded, holding out his palms, “calm down.”

Drae continued to pace, his wings shaking harder.

I handed Nikkos my wine and slipped off his lap, crawling to my nieces.

“Want to play blocks with me, Auntie?” Aurora asked.

“Not now, sweetheart,” I said to her before taking Ember in my lap. “Em, it’s important that you’re telling us the truth,” I said as I rubbed her arms.

She nodded, then looked up at Drae. “I’m just telling you what my friend tells me. She left you a letter.”

Drae stopped pacing, grabbing his hair by the roots. “Where?”

She squinted at the ceiling again before answering. “In the drawing room.”

“Drawing room?” I asked.

Drae held a hand down to me. “We’ll take you there.” He nodded toward his brothers. “Come on.”

Blaze swooped up Ember. She giggled while wrapping her arms around his neck, her doll pressed between them.

“But I’m not finished with my blocks,” Aurora protested as Nikkos hoisted her into his arms.

“We’ll come back to them later,” I reassured her.

“If you’re good girls,” Nikkos said as he ruffled her hair, “I’ll see if we can find some ginger candies.”

The girls smiled and giggled uncontrollably as we left the sitting room and soared through the atrium, landing on one of the lower levels. Drae set me down, and I recognized the dining chamber’s long table as he pulled me through the double doors into an adjoining room. It was spacious with tall ceilings, elegant chandeliers, brocade sofas, thick rugs, and at the far end of the room above the mantel hung a huge painting of a beautiful woman with a long, graceful neck, thick dark hair, and a regal look in her silver-rimmed eyes. She had a full

smile that reminded me too much of my mates' smiles, and I knew this portrait was of their mother, Lady Chara Inferni.

I turned to Ember when Blaze set her down. "Where, Em?"

She pointed to the painting of Lady Chara.

"Yes, that's our mother," Drae said tersely. "Where's the letter?"

She frowned. "She said she has it."

Nikkos jumped into the air, flying toward the portrait. "Help me get it down," he said to his brothers.

"No," Drae snapped. "You could ruin it."

The painting was taller than Nikkos. It had to be heavy. There was a chance they could drop it, but we had to know.

Nikkos grasped the top of the frame, frowning down at his brothers. "Drae, we need to see."

I clutched Drae's arm. "He's right."

Drae threw up his hands with a curse. "Fine."

Blaze jumped into the air and helped his brother lift the portrait off the wall. They had barely lifted it when an envelope fluttered to the floor.

I gasped, my hands flying to my mouth.

Nikkos and Blaze carefully hung the portrait back on the wall as Drae snatched the envelope, ripping open the seal.

After he removed the letter, he visibly swallowed, his hands trembling as he read the words aloud.

"Our Dearest Sons,

You are reading this letter because your father and I didn't survive the madness that has swept over the country. I pray that you escape the slaughter and grow to be strong, loving, and loyal men.

A few months ago, all was right with the world. With my help, Princess Flora Avias had finally conceived. The Avias

line always bears twin girls first, so Queen Malvolia named her sister's unborn daughters her heirs.

But then madness took hold of the palace. Queen Malvolia suspected her sister of wanting to assassinate her and take the throne that Flora had abdicated over thirty years ago. If you knew Flora as I did, you'd know she never had a desire to rule, much less steal the throne from the sister she loved. The world suddenly makes no sense. Our once kind and benevolent queen is burning it down, and I fear we may get caught in the crossfire.

Should we not survive, we want you to know, dear sons, that we would die a hundred deaths and burn in a thousand fires just to keep you safe. Do not weep for us, for we have passed beyond the veil together. May you one day understand the limitless love after holding your precious children in your arms.

Your loving and devoted mother,

Lady Chara Inferni”

“Holy flames!” I looked at my mates through tear-soaked eyes as I squeezed Drae’s arm. “I’m so sorry.”

Nikkos and Blaze flew down to us, and the four of us held each other while the tears silently fell. And though I was relieved to know my parents hadn’t killed my mates’ parents, my heart shattered for Lord and Lady Inferni whom I had no doubt had been innocents caught up in the mind spinner’s evil scheme.

“Can we have candy now?”

I looked down to see Aurora tugging on Nikkos’s wing.

“Sure, sprite,” he said, while drying his eyes. He swept her into his arms and set her down on the sofa and then lifted Ember onto the sofa, too. Ember laid her doll across her lap, patting its back like she was burping a baby while Nikkos pulled two pieces of candy from his pocket, handing them to the girls. “Try not to get the sofa sticky,” he said with a wink.

A futile request, but I didn’t bother telling him. I was sure he already knew they’d have sticky candy residue everywhere.

I rested my head against Blaze's shoulder as he wrapped his arm around my waist. I was grateful for his strength, for I wasn't feeling very strong at the moment. My soul was being crushed by a giant's fist as I tried to wrap my mind around all we'd learned.

Drae cursed while pacing the floor. "How strong is this mind spinner's powers?" he asked me.

"He was able to steal my sister's memories," I answered.

Nikkos fell into an oversized chair with a groan. "And if she's a white witch, what hope do we have in stopping him?"

"Is our mother still with you?" Drae asked Ember.

She nodded.

Drae crossed over to her and knelt beside the sofa. "Ask her if the mind spinner somehow altered Malvolia's memories and tricked her into believing her sister was trying to take her throne?"

Ember rolled the candy around in her mouth. "She said he changed everyone's memories."

"Everyone's?" Drae asked, his voice laced with awe. "The whole country?"

Ember nodded.

He turned to me and his brothers, a hopeless look in his eyes, and I knew he needed our strength. Blaze and I broke apart and knelt beside Drae.

I clasped Drae's hand. "How?" I asked Ember, forcing a note of calm into my voice, though inside my soul was shaking.

She squinted above her again, then nodded. I looked in the direction she squinted and saw absolutely nothing.

"He went to every town and used blinding magic," Ember said and then paused, and I realized she was repeating what Lady Chara's spirit was telling her. "He burned the libraries."

"Why?" I asked.

Ember's eyes had a glazed-over look that startled me. "Because he is Chaos," she said in a monotone.

Great goddess. What was happening to my niece?

"Chaos?" Blaze rasped.

Ember blinked at us, her eyes alert once more. "That's the name of the demon possessing him."

Fuck! Drae's curse resounded in my skull like a gong.

Ember twisted her doll's hair around her sticky finger. "She says the only way to break the spell is to kill Thorin."

"How do we do that?" I blurted.

"Find the other white witch and go to Fallax," Ember answered.

The 'other' white witch. Great goddess. She believed I was a white witch, too.

The door cracked open, and a male servant came inside. He had dark hair and eyes like a typical Ravini, but he had small human ears, and his wings were limp curtains hanging down his back. He bowed low before Drae. "My Lord."

"Leave us!" Drae jutted a finger toward the door, his eyes lit with rage. "We do not wish to be disturbed!"

The servant looked nervously from me to Drae. "I'm sorry, My Lord, but Queen Malvolia is here."

I gasped, panic icing my veins.

"What?" Drae jumped to his feet, his wings furiously flapping. "Where?"

The servant pointed toward the ceiling. "She is on the battlements, My Lord."

Drae loudly cleared his throat before turning up his chin. "Please escort her here and alert the staff we will be hosting her court for supper."

"Yes, My Lord." The servant bowed, then disappeared through the double doors.

My legs felt as limp as runny porridge as Blaze and Nikkos helped me stand, flanking me as if they were prepared to defend my life.

“Why is she here?” I rasped.

Drae visibly swallowed. “She knows we have you.”

Magic pulsed through my veins, swelling my lungs. “Will she try to kill us?”

The color drained from Drae’s face. “I hope not.”

Not a reassuring answer. No matter. I wouldn’t let her harm us, either way. Even if she had been fooled by the mind spinner, I couldn’t forget she’d tried to kill Tari and me when we were in our mother’s womb.

“What do we do?” Nikkos asked his brother.

Drae squared his shoulders, leveling us each with a dark look. “We tell her the truth, that Shiri’s parents turned on her, and Shiri seeks asylum with her aunt.”

“Do we tell her about Thorin?” I asked.

“No!” Fire swirled in his eyes and sparks flew off his fingers as his voice shook the marrow of my bones. “She might not believe us. We have no idea how much he’s corrupted her mind.”

“We’re scared, Auntie,” Aurora called behind me.

I turned around as the girls climbed off the sofa, wiping their sticky fingers on their frocks.

“Don’t be scared, girls.” I knelt in front of them, wiping candy residue from their mouths. “Listen to me. Aunt Malvolia isn’t evil. She’s confused, but just to be safe, we tell her nothing about either of your powers and nothing about the mind spinner causing chaos. We tell her the reason we left Pappo and Yaya was because they lied to us and were going to send us to a bad man. That’s all you need to tell her, okay?”

They both nodded. “Okay.”

I gasped when the doors were flung open, and my three brave mates created a wall in front of me, blocking me from

Malvolia's view with their outstretched wings.

I cringed, and the girls covered their ears when a loud horn blared, followed by a booming male voice.

“All bow to the benevolent Sorceress Queen Malvolia Circe Avias, Protector of the Realm of Delfi and Mother to all Ravini.”

I grabbed the girls' hands and followed my mates' lead, bowing low as I heard the sound of skirts swishing into the room followed by the fluttering of dozens of wings, though I couldn't see beyond my mates' wings blocking our view.

“Your Highness,” Drae said.

“You may rise,” said a woman with a raspy voice that sounded exactly like my mother, though slightly darker.

Elements, my knees shook so badly, I could hardly stand back up.

“Lord Inferni, Young Lords,” the woman snapped. “Well, did you kill them?”

Drae's spine stiffened. “No, My Queen.”

“Why not?”

I couldn't let my mates take the blame for me. Still holding the girls' hands, I pushed through my mates and faced Malvolia. I swallowed as I looked at my mother's twin, the monster my parents had warned me about my entire life, the source of my childhood nightmares. Whereas my mother was goodness and light, the woman before me was vengeance and darkness, dressed in a long, black gown and matching cape, her lips and eyes painted in dark swaths of ink. Black magic leached from her fingers as she glared at me, and she had a line of at least twenty snarling fire mages at her back. I had no idea how I was able to force the words from my throat.

“Because I stopped them.”

She arched a black brow. “And you are?”

I turned up my chin, forcing myself to be brave. I overcame an army of trolls. I could take on one very powerful witch. “Shirina Avias.”

Her wicked smile was the stuff of my nightmares. “Of course, you’re an Avias. Our resemblance is uncanny.” She tilted her head, looking at me with the curiosity of a cat toying with a mouse. “Why did you stop them?”

My knees trembled. My bladder quaked. “Because they’re my parents.”

She turned her feral glare on Drae. “And why did you listen to her?”

He let out a low chuckle. “Other than the fact that she’s our fated mate?”

When she snarled, black smoke coiling out of her fingertips, I blurted, “They had no choice. I used my siren’s call.”

“Siren’s call?” Her black smoke curled inward like a retreating tide. “There hasn’t been an Avias with the call in over a millennium.” Her nostrils flared. “How powerful is your call?”

Odd that Malvolia seemed shocked about my magic. Hadn’t Bertram and Sol told her? Or did they not understand what I’d done to them? Ember and Aurora pressed into me, burying their faces against my skirts. I rested my hands on top of their heads.

My chest swelled with magic, waiting for me to unleash it. “Very powerful.”

My mates crowded closer to me, their heat radiating outward and warming my back.

“Then why haven’t you used it to disable me or my army?” She nodded toward the line of fire mages behind her.

I looked directly into her eyes. “Because you’re not my enemy.”

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. “I’m Flora and Derrick’s enemy. Why wouldn’t I be yours?”

“My parents betrayed us,” I answered. “They tried to have a mind spinner alter our memories,” I added, then inwardly

cursed when I remembered Drae didn't want me mentioning the mind spinner.

"Mind spinner?" She laughed. "Flora's old friend, Thorin?"

I clutched the girls when they trembled against me. "Yes."

"He's a harmless simpleton." She waved me off as if she was shooing a fly, black ink spilling from her fingertips. "His spells only last a few hours."

"I-I think they last longer now," I stammered.

Don't tell her any more, Drae's warning reverberated in my mind.

Malvolia took a step toward me, that black smoke following her. "Why would they want him to alter your memories?"

It took all my willpower to hold her gaze. "They don't trust me."

"Why?"

"They think I'm evil."

Her lips twisted into a snarl. "Are you?"

"No."

She nodded toward Ember and Aurora. "Are these your children?"

I dug my fingers into their backs as they refused to look up. "They are my nieces, *your* grandnieces," I spoke through clenched teeth, my magic pressing against my throat, straining to break free. She wouldn't hurt them. I wouldn't let her.

Her mouth fell open. "The white witch's children?"

I had to work hard to unclench my jaw. "They are innocent in all this, and I will kill *anyone* who tries to harm them."

The line of fire mages behind her grew restless, grumbling as sparks flew off their hands.

Malvolia held up a silencing hand, and they went still. She looked me over before her lips curled back in a predatory

smile. “Which proves you’re not evil.” She frowned, clasping her hands in front of her as her black magic retreated. “I’m sorry your parents betrayed you.”

I swallowed. “So am I.”

“Will you swear loyalty to me and serve in my army?”

Say yes, Shiri, all three of my mates’ voices echoed in my mind.

It felt as if someone else was speaking for me as I pushed out the words. “I will.”

“And will you go to battle with me against your sister?”

The girls gasped.

I gave them a comforting squeeze. “I will disarm my sister, but I won’t hurt her.”

Malvolia went eerily still, her lips slowly parting. “You can disarm a white witch?”

I looked over my shoulder at my mates, who slowly nodded. I turned back toward her, summoning the nerve to say the words that I knew would seal my fate. “I can disarm an entire army.”

Malvolia’s smile was darkness incarnate, black magic leaching from her fingertips and spilling into the air like ink in water.

The girls and I backed up against my mates. For the briefest of seconds, I locked gazes with Drae, and the terror reflecting in his eyes filled my soul with dread. There was no turning back. I was now a soldier in the sorceress queen’s army, where I’d be forced to battle my beloved sister, putting at risk everything I held dear. Holy elements, what had I done?

The End.

Coming February 2024, *Madness of Her Mages, Court of Fae and Firelight Book Four*. Read on for a sample from my bestselling complete *Hungry for Her Wolves Series* available in ebook, print, and audio available here:

<https://amzn.to/3M5ocyW>

Hungry for Her Wolves

Hungry for Her Wolves, Book One
A Reverse-Harem Paranormal
Romance

Tara West

Copyright © 2018 by Tara West

Published by Shifting Sands Publishing

First edition, published July, 2018

All rights reserved.

She's desperate to sate her hunger. They're determined to possess her. Is she willing to give up her freedom for a taste of passion?

Chapter One

“Amara, I need you to look at the Great Dane in room two.”

Back turned, Amara jumped at the sound of her boss’s voice.

“What’s wrong with you?” Dr. Tanner said, his voice laced with concern—too much concern. If the man showed her any more attention, she’d drown in it.

“Nothing.” She moved aside when he tried to place a hand on her shoulder in that all-too-familiar gesture. Though she spent a good part of her workday refusing his advances, nothing worked. Even after she’d told him she was different, he seemed to want her more. Human males were so strange, but now wasn’t the time to dwell on that. Now was the time to focus on *him*. The man who’d walked into the clinic moments earlier and literally turned her universe on its head. Where he’d come from, she wasn’t sure, though she swore she knew him. Something about his scent was familiar and far too feral. That’s when she knew he was not human.

Then again, why would he stroll into the veterinary clinic and take a seat like he was here to get his pet, when all the animals scheduled to go home that day had already been picked up?

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him pull his flannel sleeve down over his wrist, concealing an ugly red welt. Heat crept into her cheeks when he looked at her with penetrating golden eyes. She noticed a bruise under his right eye, a swollen upper lip, and a fresh, jagged cut on his neck. He was a native, judging by his high cheekbones and tanned skin. Possibly military, with his dark, cropped hair.

“Who’s that guy?” Dr. Tanner whispered hot and heavy in her ear.

She scooted away as if his breath was on fire and shuffled a stack of papers. “I don’t know.”

Though the other girls in the office thought Dr. Tanner was attractive, with his wavy blond hair and blue eyes, he wasn't Amara's type. Nobody had ever been her type. At least not until now. The man staring at her from across the room, with his lean frame and wiry muscles, did things that both shocked and aroused her. She'd no idea why, but she was sorely tempted to vault the counter and crawl into his lap, kissing him senseless.

Dr. Tanner scooted closer. "Where's his pet?"

She continued to shuffle, cringing. "I don't know."

"What *do* you know?" Dr. Tanner's tone was laced with sarcasm.

She stiffened, glaring at him from under heavy eyelids.

Dr. Tanner puffed up his chest, reminding her of an oblivious rooster parading before a pack of wolves. "Excuse me, sir. May we help you?"

"I'm here to see her."

When Golden Eyes nodded at Amara, the glint of steel in his expression made her knees go weak. She bit her lip and clutched the counter for support, the feeling between her legs intensifying and turning into a dull, teasing throb.

Dr. Tanner turned to her with raised brows. "What's this about?"

She shrugged, at a loss for words.

Golden Eyes folded his arms and leaned back. "Hurry up and finish with your patient so we can talk."

She swayed toward him like a reed bending in the breeze, drawn to him in an inexplicable way.

Dr. Tanner cleared his throat, drumming his fingers on the counter. "Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Golden Eyes flashed a feral smile. "I'm not going anywhere."

Her boss stood his ground. "She has things to do. I must insist."

“I’m not leaving.”

“That’s it!” Dr. Tanner pounded the counter and then opened the waist-high pony door, foolishly marching up to the stranger.

When Golden Eyes unfolded himself from the chair and stood, hovering at least a head above Dr. Tanner, Amara swore she saw his nose lengthening for just a heartbeat before he balled his hands into fists.

Holy shit! Was he a shifter? Was he like her?

Looking down at Dr. Tanner, he let out a low, powerful growl that made her hair stand on end.

Holy fuck! He *was* a shifter. Other than the man who’d sired her, and his brothers, she had thought she was alone in the world, amid a mistrustful and unsympathetic species.

Dr. Tanner wisely took several steps back. “Did you just growl at me?” He fished a phone out of his lab coat with a trembling hand. “I’m calling the cops.”

“No, don’t,” she blurted, rushing around the counter and latching onto Golden Eyes’s arm. “Come on.” She dragged him toward the door.

“Amara,” Dr. Tanner whined. “You have one more patient.”

“It’s parasites,” she said over her shoulder.

“Parasites?” he said as she pushed open the door. “Are you sure?”

“I’m always sure,” she grumbled, pulling the stranger outside and relishing the feel of the mild Alaskan summer air.

As soon as the door shut behind them, she turned to Golden Eyes, nearly losing her nerve as she looked up at him. His bruises appeared worse in the glare of the sunlight. What had happened to him? “Okay, so talk.”

“Not here.” He nodded at a newer model, extended cab truck parked in the drive.

Her jaw dropped when she noticed the rims, which would've easily cost her three-month's salary. Her rusty hunk of junk had sputtered and died behind the veterinary clinic two weeks ago. Dr. Tanner had been bugging Amara to dispose of it, but the tow cost more than the scrapyard commission.

"I'm not getting in your truck." The thought of being alone in a cramped space with this man both excited and terrified her. In the end terror won. She had no idea who he was or what he planned to do to her.

"I won't drive anywhere. You have my word." He cursed a bruised and battered hand through his cropped hair.

Holy crap. Had this guy been in an accident or had something far more sinister caused his injuries? She could tell by the rigidity of his movements, and the lines framing his eyes, that he was in pain. Most likely suffering from exhaustion, too. She fought the urge to touch him and sense his injuries. She suspected the empathy she used with her animals would work on him.

She jumped at a sound behind her; Dr. Tanner was staring at them from behind the window blinds. Though the doctor's presence brought her a small measure of comfort, she was also annoyed that he'd chosen to remain behind the safety of the window. If Golden Eyes shifted, she had the feeling her boss would run screaming, leaving her at the wolf's mercy.

She heard a low growl. Golden Eyes was looking at Dr. Tanner like a wolf guarding a bone.

"I don't know you. How am I supposed to take your word on anything?" she asked.

The steel in his eyes vanished, replaced with a weariness that made her heart ache. "Because your instinct tells you I'm not lying."

She stepped back, hating how her limbs trembled. "What do you know of my instinct?" Had he picked up on her scent, as she had with him? He must have. Why else would he be here?

A black, nondescript truck with tinted windows parked by the horse corral. With her superior eyesight, she saw two men inside the vehicle, both wearing suits and sunglasses. One was an older black guy with graying hair and the other a bald, middle-aged white dude. An uneasy feeling made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

“Who are those men?” she whispered.

Golden Eyes swore under his breath. “They’re watching me to make sure I don’t cause trouble.”

“They look like government agents.”

“They are. They won’t hurt you, I promise. They’re just keeping an eye on me until my family gets here.”

Her jaw dropped. “Your family?”

He grimaced. “They think I’ve gone lone wolf.”

She gaped at him. Had he said wolf? She already knew he was a shifter, but him voicing it aloud made this situation more real, more terrifying. More enticing.

His thick brows dipped over his eyes. “Your family never explained lone wolves to you?”

“I don’t have any family,” she blurted. Damn, why’d she tell him that? She didn’t want him to know she was all alone.

“Would you get in the truck, Amara? Please.” He motioned to the big, shiny hunk of steel. “We need to talk.”

Her heart clenched at his pleading tone and the desperation in his eyes. Warning sirens in her head were overruled by her heart, and her legs propelled her forward. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

He opened the door and steadied her while she climbed inside. She sat and quickly pulled away from his touch, which seared her skin and sent warm pulses through her, liquefying that spot between her legs. Holy shit! No human man’s touch had made her feel anything except annoyance.

His truck was spotless inside, with a leather interior and a nice nav system. Something told her he didn’t need the

navigation, that he relied solely on instinct.

When he climbed in next to her, all common sense flew out the window, and she stared at him like a love-struck pup. He was strikingly handsome in a rugged sort of way. More moisture pooled in her panties when he looked at her with smoldering eyes, nostrils flaring. She shifted at an unfamiliar ache pulsing between her thighs. Was this what it felt like to be horny? She instinctively leaned toward him, reaching for the collar on his flannel shirt.

To her disappointment and relief, he pulled away, clenching his hands and looking at her with a face screwed up so tight, it was almost comical. “We need to control ourselves,” he groaned, panting like a wounded animal. “I can’t take you here. My brothers would never forgive us.”

What was he saying? She shook her head as if to shake off a fog of lust that was so thick, it permeated the air, making a bead of sweat run down her forehead.

He held out both hands in a gesture of surrender. “Control yourself.”

She blinked hard, a wave of embarrassment overcoming her. Could he smell her desire? Could one man turn a woman’s brain to mush and make her want to spread her legs?

“What do you mean, you don’t have any family?” he asked.

She rubbed shaky hands down her legs, forcing herself to regain her composure. “I’m asking questions first.” She tilted her chin, proud of herself for asserting dominance, though not sure how long her courage would last.

“Okay.” He flashed a slanted smile, his cheeks reddening slightly. “Ask.”

His canines were pronounced, longer than his other teeth. Just like hers. A dentist had offered to file them down, but she’d refused. They were the only trace of her wolf when she was in human form, reminding her of who she was.

She cleared her throat. “What’s your name?”

“Luc,” he answered. “Luc Thunderfoot.”

She arched back, squinting at him. “Thunderfoot?”

“It’s an old family name.” He chuckled. “If you met the alphas in my family, you’d understand.”

“Alphas?”

He gave her a long look. “The heads of our pack. Are you going to tell me about your family?”

“It’s pretty straightforward.” She shrugged, turning her gaze to the window. Her boss was still looking at them through a small slit in the blinds, trying to remain inconspicuous. Didn’t he have a clinic to run? “I don’t have any family, except my dogs.” She’d left them in the run behind the clinic. She’d heard them barking before Luc arrived, warning her a stranger was approaching. She wondered why they’d gone silent. Did they know Luc was a friend?

“What about your fathers?” he asked.

“Fathers?” Was it a wolf thing to call more than one man dad? “I only had one, and he’s somewhere in Eastern Europe.”

His eyes darkened. “You never met him?”

“No.”

Flames lit his eyes, and anger pulsed off his skin in waves. Was he angry with her or her father?

“Do you know anything about him?” he asked, scraping his knee against hers.

Just that one little touch was enough to make her jerk back as a bolt of lust zinged through her. She rubbed heat into her gooseflesh. “Just what my mom told me, but she was prone to exaggeration.”

He looked her over with unwavering eyes and a tight smile. “Try me.”

She released a shaky breath, recalling the ugly story of her conception as told by her mother, aka Cathi, aka Evil Bitch from Hell. “My mom had a one-night stand with him when she was traveling through Europe. Not even one night. While they

were having sex in his barn, his brothers broke down the door and beat the shit out of him. She said she barely escaped with her life.” Because of that night, Cathi claimed to have been mentally scarred for life. She’d said that’s why she turned to drugs, to escape the terror of watching those demons tear down walls and throw her lover around the barn.

The shadows over Luc’s eyes lengthened, making his bruises more pronounced. For a moment, she thought he was shifting.

“What happened to your face?” she blurted. Why had he come to her all broken and bruised, and who’d hurt him? Was he in danger? Was *she* in danger?

He waved away her concern. “My brothers and I got into a fight.”

She looked outside. The black truck was still there, the men inside looking at them through binoculars. “Why are government agents here?”

“Their job is to help conceal us.”

Her hand flew to her throat. “So the government knows?”

“Yeah,” he said casually, as if two agents on his tail was no big deal.

All these years she’d been careful to conceal her wolf, only exposing herself when she was in danger or to save her foster family from getting killed. She’d had nightmares about the government finding out about her wolf and bringing her to a top-secret lab to test her DNA. To think, if they’d discovered her, they might have reunited her with her kind long ago.

“And they haven’t tried to experiment on you or kill you?”

“Are you kidding me?” He chuckled. “We’re the Army’s secret weapon.”

“You’re all in the Army?” Would they try to force her into the Army, too? Not that she wasn’t patriotic, but she wasn’t keen on being told what to do. She’d lived independently for almost four years, and she wasn’t about to start taking orders from anyone.

“Usually just the third son from every pack,” he said proudly. “We’re the best trackers.”

Her shoulders fell in relief.

“Okay,” he said, “my turn for more questions. Your father was a lone wolf?”

“I don’t know what he was.” She looked him over, wondering if his long-sleeved shirt covered other injuries. “Why would your brothers give you black eyes?”

“I went a little nuts when I caught your scent.” He let out a low, dark chuckle. “They were trying to calm me. Did your mom notice anything different about your dad and his brothers?”

“She said they were demons, that their eyes changed and they grew bigger and hairy. That’s all.” She paused, scratching the back of her head. “I don’t understand. You went nuts when you caught my scent?”

“I’m the best tracker in my tribe. Our reservation isn’t too far from Fairbanks. I scented you from four hundred miles away.” He leaned so close, she could smell the dried blood on his lip. “Do you understand what your dad’s brothers were doing? They were trying to stop him from going lone wolf. We’re not supposed to mate with outsiders.”

What little moisture she had left in her mouth evaporated. “Y-You mean humans?”

“Yeah.”

She swallowed a lump at the back of her throat. “So I was a mistake?”

He flashed the faintest of smiles as he reached for the lock of her hair that had fallen from the confines of her tight bun, twirling it around his finger. “You’re not a mistake to me. And the Ancients clearly didn’t think you were a mistake. I know it’s no accident your name is Amara.”

She blinked through a thin mist of emotion. “I’m not sure what you mean. My mom named me after her friend. I don’t know what I am.” She looked at her hands, fisted in her lap.

“Amara happens to be the name of our ancient goddess, mate to our god, Amarok, and his brothers. You’re a wolf-shifter, an Amaroki,” he said. “Like me.”

She shared a name with an ancient goddess? How odd. But that didn’t matter as much as the fact that she was in the company of another shifter.

“So you can shift?” Even though he’d just told her as much, saying it aloud made it more real. She was mesmerized by the smell of earth and pine that permeated his skin and in awe of the warmth he exuded.

“My whole family can,” he answered, “and all of my tribe.”

“Omigod, an entire tribe of shifters?” This was too much.

He released her hair, peering at her through thick lashes. “What happened to your mom?”

Ugh. The conversation was about to go from awkward to really awkward. “I don’t know. Last I heard, she died of cancer.”

His jaw dropped. “You weren’t there when she died?”

She hated having to explain her relationship with Cathi to strangers. They didn’t understand the evil that had blackened her soul.

“The state took me from her when I was thirteen.” She hung her head as shame and sorrow washed over her. “She wasn’t exactly the best mom.”

He cupped her chin in a firm yet gentle grip. “What did she do to you?”

The sincerity in his gaze was enough to make her heart do a backflip. They’d only just met, but she was inexplicably drawn to him.

“Put her cigarettes out on my legs, told me almost daily how much she hated me and I was the spawn of a demon,” she said on a rush of air, then clamped her mouth shut. She decided to leave out the part about Cathi siding with her

stepfather after he tried to rape Amara. Instinct told her Luc wouldn't handle that revelation well.

"I'm so sorry." The pity in his eyes was almost her undoing.

Why had she told a stranger about her mom anyway? She'd only ever told her first foster parents about the cigarette burns, and they'd given her back to the state.

"It is what it is." She pulled away, looking out the window, scowling as the agents stared at her. "It's taught me to be independent and resourceful. Besides, I have my dogs." She swallowed and let out a slow breath. "I don't need parents."

"Where did you go after you left your mom?"

His voice was a hoarse whisper. Had her story made him emotional?

When she turned back around, she was surprised to see color fanning his tanned cheeks and neck. "I spent two years with some foster parents. That didn't work." She pretended their rejection hadn't crushed her, hadn't turned her into a bitter loner. "I stayed with a few other foster families for a while, and then my uncle suddenly decided to be charitable and take me in, but that was only because he needed a slave. I ran away from him when I was almost eighteen. I've been on my own ever since."

A visible knot worked down his throat as he swallowed. "The females in my tribe are cherished and protected. If we'd known about you then, we would've taken care of you."

Cherished and protected? How badly she wanted to believe him. He seemed sincere, and her instinct wasn't raising any alarms. But she'd been fooled before. She wasn't about to be fooled again. She crossed her arms, narrowing her eyes. "Why did you come here?"

"I knew you were mine."

He said it with such cutting finality, she knew it to be true.

Fuck! She wasn't prepared for that. "I don't belong to any man... or wolf."

He leaned into her, overpowering her with his heat and sending her libido into a tailspin by gently squeezing her knee. “You do now.”

She released a shuddering breath, struggling to keep her lust under control as that throbbing between her legs returned with a vengeance. She needed to get away from this man. This wolf.

“Well, it was nice talking to you.” She grabbed the handle and shoved the door open, filling her lungs with fresh air. Anything to get rid of the scent of him. “I have to get back to work.”

“Hang on.” He latched onto her arm, pulling her back inside, then reached over her and jerked the door shut with a bang. “You can’t just leave.”

While the virile man pressed against her, she tried to ignore her growing desire, but it was no use. Her breasts molded to his hard angles, her nipples pebbling in response. She breathed harshly as her chest tightened. “My boss is watching us.” She nodded to a shadow behind the blinds.

“My family’s going to be here any minute.” He spoke through clenched teeth, tension in every line of his body. “My brothers have caught your scent by now. They’ll rip that doctor apart if you go back in there.”

Panic seized her. “What?” Why would they do that? Were all wolf brothers this vicious? Shit. All this time she’d longed to meet others like her, and now she wasn’t so sure she wanted anything to do with her species.

Luc’s eyes narrowed. “I saw the way he was looking at you.”

She scowled. “Why is it any of their business how my boss looks at me?”

He flashed a knowing smile. “They’re very possessive.”

She pressed her back against the door, made uneasy by the feral look in his eyes. “So whose girlfriend am I supposed to be, yours or theirs?”

“Yes,” he answered evenly, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

She blinked hard, looking at him as if he’d grown a second head. “Yes what?”

“We mate as a pack. One female, and three to four brothers, depending on the size of the pack.”

She stared, waiting for him to break into laughter and tell her he was only joking. When he didn’t, her stomach tied itself in a knot. He couldn’t be serious. “That’s odd,” she managed to rasp, feeling like a wad of cotton was stuck in her throat. Three to four males for one female? What was one girl to do with all those mates?

“That’s how it’s done in our species,” he said matter-of-factly, as if sharing a girl with his brothers was the most natural thing in the world. “One she-wolf bears a daughter and three to four sons.”

“I’m not having all those kids,” she blurted. What the hell did they think she was, their sex slave? Their queen bee?

“You’re used to humans.” He snickered. “Once you assimilate into our culture, you’ll see it’s normal.”

He thought this was funny? Well, she was done with the jokes. “Who said I was assimilating into your culture?”

“You can’t stay here. You need to be with your own kind. Your mates will keep you safe.”

She stuck a thumb in her chest. “I keep me safe, and I keep Buster, Gremlin, and Scrooge safe, too.”

A low rumble sounded from his chest. “Who are they?”

Gah! He sounded like Buster protecting his football. She cocked her head, smirking. “My dogs.”

The tension lines around his mouth melted away. “Your dogs are welcome to live at the reservation with us.”

“I’m not going to a reservation.” Her spine stiffened, and she glared at him through slitted lids. “The animals here need me.”

He held out both hands in a gesture of surrender. “Your mates need you.”

“I don’t think you understand how important my work is. I can diagnose any animal without examining it.” She’d built a reputation as a dog whisperer. People came from all over Alaska to let her examine their pets. She’d become somewhat of a local celebrity after detecting a slow-growing cancer in the police chief’s favorite husky last month. The people here admired her and treated her with respect.

“You can really do that?” He scratched the back of his head, looking like Buster when he was searching for the origin of his fart. “My father said his great-grandmother had a similar gift, but I don’t know any other females who can do it.” He patted her knee in a patronizing gesture. “It will come in handy when you’re raising our young.”

“I’m not a breeding machine.” She jerked her leg away, ignoring his frown. Last thing she needed was him touching her and hormones muddling her brain. She was about to shove open the door again when his face fell, his body going rigid. “What is it?”

His nostrils flared. “My brothers are here.”

“Good.” She turned up her nose, squeezing the door handle. “Tell them I’m not interested. I’m going back to work.”

“Do not get out of the truck.” He yanked her away from the door so hard, she cried out. “My brothers have scented you. They know you’re in heat. You don’t want to piss them off.”

They knew she was in heat? Was the smell of her desire that powerful? How embarrassing. She shook off his hand. “Are you serious?”

“Stay put.” He climbed out of the truck, leveling her with a hardened stare. “For your own safety.” He slammed the door, gravel crunching under his boots as he stalked over to a big silver truck that had barreled into the driveway, throwing up rocks and dust before screeching to a halt.

Her jaw dropped when she saw three broad-shouldered men get out, their iron-eyed gazes homing in on her. Holy heck! They looked much bigger than Luc and far more lethal, especially the guy with the smooth, black hair falling to his shoulders. When he looked at her, her insides liquefied. She quickly averted her gaze, her heartbeat hammering in her ears. These were more monsters than men, and they wanted to be her mates? How was she supposed to say no to them?

* * *

Luc cautiously walked up to his brothers. Every muscle in his body ached. He hadn't slept in over three days, and he was pretty sure a few ribs were bruised, but all that mattered was keeping Amara safe.

"Hey," he said to his brothers, keeping a wary eye on Drasko, the second alpha, and therefore the most temperamental and unpredictable of their pack.

"You found her." His oldest brother and head alpha rushed forward, flashing a broad grin. "You weren't fucking crazy."

"Back off, Hakon, okay?" He braced his legs and held out his hands, inwardly cursing when pain lanced up his left side. "She's scared. She doesn't understand what's happening."

Drasko and Hakon frowned at his truck. Luc tossed a glance at the beautiful blonde with the wide, frightened eyes. Poor Amara must be scared shitless. His alpha brothers were a few inches taller than him, with broad shoulders that would rival professional linebackers. They made a formidable pair, the largest protectors in their tribe, even bigger than their fathers, the tribal chiefs. Behind them, their youngest brother, Rone, peered over Hakon's shoulder with wide, eager eyes, shifting from foot to foot. He wasn't as tall as the alphas, but like them, he was broad-chested and strong, built to help their mate haul around the children.

"Where did she come from?" Hakon asked.

"Her father was a loner." Luc heaved a sigh. "She was raised by humans and abused as a child. She's had a rough

life.” *In other words*, he projected into their heads, *go fucking easy on her*.

“When I find her father,” Drasko rumbled. “I’m ripping him apart.”

After Luc’s thorough thrashing by his older brother, he had no doubt Drasko would keep his word. Somehow he doubted Amara would appreciate her mate shredding her father, even if it was to avenge her honor.

“I don’t think he knew about her.” He kept his voice steady in an effort to calm his brother. “Her mom ran off after they mated.”

“I’m still killing him.” Drasko spoke between clenched teeth, letting the deep baritone of his protector take over.

“Calm down,” Luc urged, glancing again at the girl. Even from a distance, he could smell her fear.

“She’s scared.” Hakon grimaced. “We need to get her back to the reservation. What’s her name?”

“You’re not going to believe this,” Luc answered, “but it’s Amara. She said she was named after her mother’s friend.”

His brothers simultaneously gaped at him.

“Do you think our goddess paid her mother a visit?” Rone asked.

Hakon stroked his lightly stubbled chin. “I’m not sure. Anything is possible. For now, I’m going to take it as a good sign.”

“When’s the honeymoon?” Rone asked a little too eagerly. When Rone wasn’t cooking up something in the kitchen, he was dreaming of their mate, fantasizing about her hair and eyes, and especially her tits. The poor pup was so horny, they went through several jars of lube a week at their house, and a shitload of socks and washcloths.

His truck door opened, and Luc spun around. “Amara!” He pointed at her, ignoring the pain the motion caused him. Panic iced his limbs when he felt tension rolling off Drasko in erratic pulses. “I said to stay in the truck.”

She pushed a strand of honey-blonde hair behind her ear, leveling him with piercing silvery-blue eyes in a beautiful act of defiance. “You’re not my boss. I need to check on my patients.” She stomped toward the rusty brown front door of the clinic that looked more like a shack waiting to be condemned.

Too bad for her Drasko was faster, reaching the door in a few long strides and blocking her path.

Luc’s legs felt encrusted in concrete blocks as he chased after them. *Please don’t lose your cool, Drasko*, he silently pleaded.

* * *

Putting both hands on her hips, Amara glared up at the solid, tall hunk of tattooed man-flesh with long, dark hair. “Would you move please?”

Tattooed Stud spread his legs, scowling at her with eyes that shifted from gold to brown before gesturing at the window behind him. “Who is the man looking through the blinds?”

Oh, boy. Luc wasn’t kidding when he said his brothers were possessive. “My boss.”

“Not anymore.”

Tattoo Stud’s command was a deep rumble, rattling her bones and the ground under her feet like the tremors of an earthquake. His eyes turned from brown to gold again, but they weren’t like a wolf’s eyes. For a moment she feared there was a different creature inside him, like maybe the demon Cathi had warned her about. She shook her head at the thought. Hadn’t Luc said they were all wolf shifters?

She splayed a hand across her chest, rapidly losing patience with the big beast who breathed down her neck. She would not back down, no matter how much he rattled her. “I beg your pardon?”

He spun her around so fast, the breath whooshed from her lungs. He backed her against the door and then leaned against her, trapping her when he planted a hand on either side of her

head. “Pack your things. You’re leaving with us.” It wasn’t a request. It was a command.

“Oh? You think so?” She cocked a brow, inwardly smiling when Luc and another brother pulled him away.

“Ease up, Drasko,” Luc growled.

Drasko, huh? Somehow, the name fit. Her chest heaved as Drasko stared her down, and she read the meaning in his predatory gaze: *You belong to me.*

The throbbing between her legs returned with a vengeance, and that slow drip in her panties turned into a steady trickle. Damn libido! Why would she get all hot and bothered by this beast? She pushed off the door when it rattled behind her.

“Amara, is everything all right?” Dr. Tanner poked his head around the door, eyes widening when he looked at Drasko.

“Yes.” She expelled a shaky breath, willing herself to stop trembling. “It will be.”

“What if it wasn’t all right?” Nostrils flaring, Drasko looked ready to charge Dr. Tanner like a raging bull. “What would *you* do about it?”

“Omigod!” she spat, eyeing Drasko with derision. “Are you serious?” Even if she wanted to leave her life behind, there was no way she would mate with this jerk, no matter how horny he made her.

“Our parasite case has taken a turn for the worse.” Tanner’s hand shook as he mopped sweat off his brow, his gaze nervously flitting from one brother to the other before settling on Drasko. “I need you to tell me what’s wrong.”

“He needs fluids,” Amara said.

“Aren’t *you* supposed to be the doctor?” Drasko said on a low growl.

Tanner nodded at Amara. “I am, but she can diagnose faster than I can.”

Drasko looked at Amara, eyes bulging. “You can diagnose illness?”

“Yeah. It’s no big deal.”

“It *is* a big deal.” He crossed his arms, looking down his nose at the doctor. “I bet you pay her a meager wage and force her to do all the work.”

“I-I pay her fairly,” he stammered.

He didn’t pay her fairly at all. A doctor in Oregon had given her twice as much, and the cost of living there was half what it was in Alaska.

“I don’t think you do.” Drasko smirked as he gave Tanner a long look. “I think you’re a cheap-ass.”

“What I pay my employees is none of your business.” Tanner turned up his chin, looking at Amara with a trembling lip, as if she had the power to save him. “I also give her food and housing.”

By “food” he meant packaged dorm-room noodles and by “housing” he meant the run-down sixteen-foot travel trailer parked behind the horse stalls, leaving her as unofficial night watchman and handler of horse dung. One good thing had come from her living quarters. She knew what a sick horse’s shit smelled like, which came in handy when diagnosing her patients.

“She won’t be needing your assistance anymore.” Drasko waved the doctor away as if he was a fly buzzing about his head. “We’ll take it from here.”

Her boss’s jaw went slack. “Amara, are you quitting?”

“No,” she said firmly, shooting a glare at Drasko.

“Yes.” Drasko smirked, issuing her a challenging look.

This beast certainly was sure of himself. She almost wanted to go with him, just to teach him some manners.

“Folks, as touching as this reunion is, I think we should take this to the reservation.”

“We’re handling it, Johnson,” Drasko rumbled without taking his eyes off Amara.

She hadn’t even noticed when one of the feds got out of the truck. Johnson slowly approached them, his eyes trained on Drasko with each step. Even the agent knew this wolf was out of control.

She impatiently tapped a foot on the concrete. “I’m not leaving.”

Drasko had the nerve to chuckle. He shook off his brothers with a grunt and stepped forward, holding out a hand. “Stop this nonsense. You’re coming with us.”

Her traitorous body swayed toward him, nearly compelling her to obey. She forced herself to take a step back, no easy feat while looking into Drasko’s mesmerizing eyes, which shifted from brown to gold and back again. The wolf continued his advance, so she retreated farther, bumping into Dr. Tanner.

Drasko snatched her arm and pulled her away from the doctor. She slammed into his hard chest with a grunt, then gaped up at him in wide-eyed shock, a fog of lust clouding her thoughts. She knew she should be angry, but she was so damn horny.

“Drasko,” one of the brothers said, “you need to chill.”

He stroked her cheek with the back of a calloused hand. “Back off, Hakon. I’m handling this.”

She felt like a rabbit caught in a snare, the throb between her legs pulsing like a heartbeat. Holy shit, this beast made her so angry, and hot damn, she so wanted to fuck him.

“You boys need me to lend a hand?” Johnson said behind her.

Everything, even her thudding heartbeat, sounded distant while she was trapped beneath Drasko’s gaze.

“We don’t need your help,” he growled, grazing her cheek again and causing a soft moan to escape her lips and her eyelids to involuntarily flutter. “You want me.” His warm

breath in her ear turned her knees to jelly. “Don’t deny your instinct.”

“Who are you people?” Tanner squeaked like a prepubescent mouse.

It was at that moment she realized why she wasn’t attracted to the doctor. It wasn’t just because he was human. Dr. Tanner was a wimp compared to her mates. No, wait, not her mates. Why had she thought that? She wasn’t going to mate with anyone, especially not this hulking testosterone-induced beast holding her. She blinked up at Drasko, struggling out of his grip as he dug his fingers into her shoulders.

“You have ten minutes to pack your things.” His commanding voice was like an invisible rope, tethering her to him.

Holy heck! How could she refuse him when he looked at her like he was mentally fucking her? When she wanted so badly for him to push her into Luc’s truck, rip off her pants, and hump the living shit out of her. In all honesty, she wanted Luc to join them, squeezing her tits and sucking her nipples while his brother fucked her. For that matter, the other brothers could come along, too, each fucking her senseless until she melted in a pool of lust.

“You heard her,” Tanner squeaked a little louder. “She’s not going anywhere.”

She managed to tear her gaze away from Drasko long enough to glance at the doctor. “Go inside, Dr. Tanner.” Was he for real? Did he really think he had a chance in hell against these four?

The doctor turned up a quivering chin. “N-Not without you.” Then he did something really stupid. He lunged for her, grabbing hold of her elbow and trying to yank her out of Drasko’s arms.

Drasko spun her behind him so fast, she tripped over her own feet and would’ve fallen flat on her face if she hadn’t fallen against another brother.

The brother pulled her close, awkwardly holding her like she was made of glass, his tanned cheeks turning ten shades of red. “I got you.” The guy wasn’t much older than her. He still had a youthful glow in his eyes and squeezable cheeks, plus the most infectious grin.

Instinct told her he was the youngest of them, and despite her desire to put distance between herself and these beefy brutes, she couldn’t help but enjoy being wrapped in his arms while the booming voices behind her seemed to fade away.

But her reprieve was short-lived. Dr. Tanner’s girly squeal hurt her ears as the tell-tale sounds of a scuffle broke out, followed by the loud crunch of bone and the thud of a body hitting the concrete.

“Dr. Tanner!” She reluctantly jerked free of the young brother’s warm embrace and fell to her knees, reaching for her boss as blood gushed from his nose and his eyes rolled back. She turned on Drasko with a snarl. “You asshole! What the hell is wrong with you?”

He jerked as if he’d been slapped. “He put his hands on you.”

“He grabbed my arm. He didn’t hurt me.” She felt for Dr. Tanner’s pulse while he lay eerily still, too still. “I think you killed him.”

“I didn’t kill him.” Drasko kicked the wall so hard with the tip of his boot, a flower pot rattled on the window sill before shattering beside his feet.

“Drasko, you need to calm down.” The brother Amara thought was called Hakon clutched Drasko’s shoulder with white knuckles. Though his eyes changed from black to bright gold, there was something in the proud turn of his chin and rigid shoulders that told Amara he wasn’t as unhinged as Drasko. He exuded raw male power in a subtle, confident way, and he was devastatingly handsome, too. He had an unruly mop of dark hair and a beard-shadowed jaw, tight denim jeans, and the sleeves on his flannel shirt rolled up just far enough to reveal thick biceps, reminding her of a Native Paul Bunyan.

“Don’t tell me to calm down, Hakon.” Drasko tried in vain to shake off his brother. “Do you expect me to stand by while this human puts his hands on our mate?”

“Brother, control yourself.” Hakon’s rumble shook the earth with the force of an earthquake tremor.

Luc knelt beside the doctor, feeling his pulse before waving to his younger brother. “Rone, help me get him inside.”

Amara smiled at Rone as he knelt beside her. She bit her lip when he smiled back and blushed from the exposed skin of his smooth, broad chest to the roots of his sandy-brown hair.

“Thank you,” she said as he helped carry her boss into the hospital. Honestly, Rone was so big, he could’ve carried the doctor by himself.

“Anything to make you smile,” he said with a wink.

It was her turn to blush. She followed them, admiring Rone’s round buttocks in his tight jeans.

“Take him to the back room.” She waved at a door, then indicated the table reserved for large animals.

Thank goodness the other lab techs had gone home. What would they have said if they’d seen the spectacle her “mates” had made at the clinic?

She leaned over the doctor after they laid him down. “Dr. Tanner, can you hear me?”

He groaned when she examined his swollen and bloody nose. Luckily Luc had already made himself useful and found an ice pack.

“Let me help,” he said, holding it over Tanner’s nose. “I’m trained in first aid.”

“Are there any other employees here?” Rone asked, edging closer to her.

She didn’t scoot away when his hip grazed her side. “No.”

“He’s okay.” Luc lifted each eyelid. “Just knocked out.”

The doctor groaned again, his head falling to one side while his nose literally expanded before her eyes. It had to be broken. Damn, what a mess. Drasko deserved to get arrested for assault.

She straightened at a knock on the door. “Miss, I need to ask you a few questions.” Johnson, the black agent, popped his head inside. “Where is your family?”

Just because these wolves trusted him didn’t mean she had to. “I’m not talking to you unless I have a lawyer.”

Rone laughed.

Amara glared.

He frowned, hanging his head like a puppy who’d been caught messing on the carpet. “Sorry.”

“Leave her alone,” Luc said. “Her dad was a lone wolf. She doesn’t know.”

The detective ignored Luc, slipping inside and shutting the door behind him. “I need to know who else knows about your wolf.”

“Johnson,” Luc growled. “I said to leave her alone.”

When the agent stared pointedly at her, she said, “Nobody.” Actually, that wasn’t true. A few humans knew about her wolf, but they’d all been scared shitless, and she knew they wouldn’t tell.

“Are you sure?” The agent glanced at Tanner. “What about him?”

Luc growled louder. This agent was either really stupid, or he knew Luc well enough to know his limits.

“Dr. Tanner? He knows I’m different. That’s it.” Last week she’d finally relented and told her boss she wasn’t human after one of his many advances. When he’d chuckled and said she was playing hard to get, she shifted her eyes just enough to reveal her inner wolf. That was enough to get him to take a hesitant step back. He’d done a good job keeping his distance until today. What had changed, and why wouldn’t he give up already?

Agent Johnson stood behind Luc, looking at her over the rim of his sunglasses. “Has the doctor seen you change?”

The door flew open and slammed against the wall. Hakon stood there with a sheepish Drasko behind him. Hakon marched up to the agent, bearing down on him with a scowl so dark and menacing, she thought she saw steam pouring from his nostrils. “She’s not answering any more of your questions.”

“Fine.” The agent threw up his hands. “Can someone at least put a necklace on her?”

Hakon fished something out of his pocket, then placed it in her palm. “Put this on,” he said in a tone leaving no room for refusal.

She looked at the amethyst gemstone dangling from a black leather band and remembered her grandmother had left her an amethyst ring when she died. Because it was too big, Amara had worn it on a cord around her neck. Though Amara had wanted to keep the family heirloom, she’d hocked it because she thought it had brought her bad luck. She wasn’t able to shift when she wore it.

She looked at Hakon. “Why?”

He swore under his breath. “Because Johnson doesn’t know you, and he’s worried you’ll shift in public. You only have to wear it until we get to the reservation.”

She hadn’t realized it was the amethyst that trapped her inner wolf. She slipped the necklace over her head with trembling hands. “But I’m staying here.” She said it without conviction. Was she changing her mind? No. She couldn’t go off with these men. Maybe she could mate with Luc, Hakon, and especially with Rone, but no way in hell was she mating with Drasko, no matter how wet he made her.

A booming rumble from the front office shook the building. “What in Ancients’ name is going on?”

Agent Johnson shot Hakon a sly look. “Your dad doesn’t sound happy.”

“We ditched them on the highway when we caught her scent.” Hakon winked at Amara. “We can’t help it if they drive like old men.”

She shifted uncomfortably when Hakon looked at her. Something about the power emanating from him put her on edge.

A man who looked like an older version of Hakon filled the narrow doorway with broad shoulders. His chest heaved and his nostrils flared when he looked at the brothers, then at the doctor’s supine body.

“Luc didn’t go loner.” Hakon nodded at her. “This is Amara. Her father was a loner.”

Her knees weakened when the older man looked her over like she was a prized cow. “Amara, as in the goddess?” He gnawed on his lip. “From the Romanian tribe.” It wasn’t a question but a statement, as if he knew it to be true.

How did he know her father had been from Romania? That was where Cathi said she’d met her “sperm donor.”

Hakon nodded. “Smells like.”

Their noses were better than hers. She couldn’t tell where these men came from by sniffing them. She just knew they smelled different yet familiar.

The older man frowned, deep lines framing his eyes and mouth. “They never told us of a lone wolf. I’ll contact their chieftain when we get home.”

“Good.” Drasko’s eyes shifted again, his golden pupils elongating and making him look like that demon Cathi had warned her about. “When you find out who her father is”—Drasko’s voice dropped to a baritone so low, he sounded like a recording playing in slow motion—“I’m flying to Romania and tearing his limbs off one by one.”

Drasko was going to kill her father? Her world tipped, then spun, and her legs buckled.

“Amara!” she thought she heard Luc scream before her world darkened.

Chapter Two

Something was off. Amara wasn't at the clinic. The low rumble beneath her told her she was traveling in a truck. She heard the excited squeals of her two little dogs, followed by the erratic wagging of their tails. She smelled their excitement. Then she smelled three familiar yet foreign scents, and her memories came rushing back. She twitched, and her eyelids fluttered.

“She's waking up. What do I say to her?”

She recognized Rone's voice, the adorably sexy shifter, the youngest of the four brothers who were supposedly her mates.

“Just talk to her, Rone,” an unfamiliar voice answered.

She opened her eyes and stared across the bench seat at Rone, who was looking at her like a jackrabbit caught in a wolf's line of sight. Her traitorous dogs were climbing all over him, smothering him with kisses and demanding to be petted. Weird. Her grumpy black schnauzer, Scrooge, usually didn't like anyone but her. Her brown terrier mix, Gremlin, hated men, especially Dr. Tanner, yet they were showering Rone with affection.

“Hi.” He flashed a soft smile, his cheeks coloring while he scratched Scrooge behind the ears. “Are you okay?”

She sat up, dragging a hand down her face and looking out at pine trees moving past in a blur. When Amara looked out the back window, her breath caught in her throat. They were being closely followed by a truck. She barely made out Hakon in the driver's seat. Drasko was beside him, and Luc was sitting in the back cab beside a familiar big yellow head. They'd brought Buster, too? Her relief at not being parted from her Lab was short-lived when she saw her bulging backpack on the floor. They'd packed her things? She wasn't just going on a trip with these guys. They were taking her from the clinic for good, rehoming her in a foreign place with big, brooding wolves.

She observed the interior of the truck. She could tell by the old stereo and missing nav system that it wasn't as new as Luc's, but it was still well-maintained. Two older men sat in the seat in front of her. She recognized the driver from the clinic. He was Hakon's father and the alpha of the pack. When she caught him looking at her in the rearview mirror, she felt compelled to look away. He scared her for some reason. The man sitting next to him reminded her of Luc, with the same wiry frame. She guessed he was the tracker's father. He looked at her briefly, nostrils flaring, then turned up his nose, sniffing the air.

"Slow down," he said to the driver. "I scent a herd of elk ahead. Over a dozen."

As the truck slowed, she made out highway markers. They'd left Anchorage and were heading north.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked Rone.

"To the reservation," he answered. "You need to be with your own kind, Amara."

"But you're not my kind." She knew these men were more animal than her. She couldn't scent any elk. She couldn't drop her voice low enough to rattle the walls. She didn't think she was wolf enough to fit in with this pack. "I'm part human."

"Amara." Rone chuckled. "We're all part human."

"But what about Dr. Tanner?" She hadn't even examined him. What if he had a concussion?

Rone's smile faded. "He'll wake up with a painful break, but he'll be fine. The agents called in backup to take care of him."

She wondered what the animals would do without her. There were sick ones who needed her help, some terminal, which she'd hoped to help comfort in their final days. Then there were her things. Were they all in her backpack? She wanted to grab it, but it was wedged under the front seat, and she was too afraid to ask the intimidating wolf in front of her to move. She only had one other bra, the one with the safety pins that she was forced to wear on laundry day. And what

about her photographs and her camera? As if sensing her distress, Gremlin and Scrooge climbed into her lap, nuzzling her chest. She held tightly to her pups, doing her best to hold back her tears.

“We have to go back,” she blurted.

“No, Amara,” the alpha driver answered on a low grumble. “You’re not safe on your own.”

“But my parasite patient needs attention.”

“Luc gave him an IV,” Rone said. “He’s had lots of first aid experience in the Army.”

Amara was glad the Great Dane had received care, but she still wanted to go back. “B-But you forgot my other dog.” She thought of Max, the sweet shepherd left behind. He was Dr. Tanner’s dog, but he liked Amara better than the doctor, and they’d formed a tight bond over the past few months.

The alpha’s eyes narrowed as he looked at her through the mirror. “Luc said you only had three.”

“No.” She bit her lip, feeling intense pressure under the scrutiny of his glare. “There’s Max, my shepherd.”

Luc’s father turned to her. “Amara, look at me.”

When she looked at him, she felt like a flower wilting under a heat lamp.

“There is no Max,” he said. “I can tell when you’re lying. I know you’re scared, but you’re not going back. Understood?”

She swallowed a lump of emotion, then looked down at her hands, fisted in her lap. “Yes,” she murmured. “There is a Max, though.”

“But he wasn’t your dog,” Luc’s dad said accusingly.

She sniffled, doing her best to hold back the tears. Poor Max. She knew he’d miss her and her dogs. How excited he was to see her every morning. How he loved to play with Buster. She wiped a tear as it slipped over her cheek. “I’ll still miss him.”

Rone leaned forward, looking at her with big amber eyes. “I promise, Amara, once you get used to your new life, you won’t miss your old one.”

She vehemently shook her head as more tears escaped. “I’ll always miss Max.” She ended on a sob, covering her face with her hands. How could they take her from her life and not at least let her have closure? Her pups whimpered, coating her hands with kisses.

“Can we go back and get him?” Rone begged.

She looked at him through a crack in her fingers. He was leaning against the front seat, giving the men a look like Buster begging for scraps.

“Quiet, Rone,” the alpha grumbled, eyes on the road. “You’re not helping.”

Her shoulders fell when she realized she’d lost. She’d never see Max or anyone from her old life again. Not that she cared about the people, but she’d sure miss the animals. She wiped more tears and then giggled when Scrooge and Gremlin showered her face with kisses. Her dogs were her children. She’d go crazy if she’d been forced to leave them behind, too.

She petted them for a long while, smiling when Gremlin rolled on his back, demanding tummy scratches.

She looked at Rone, who was looking back at her with longing in his eyes, as if he wanted his tummy scratched, too. Her nostrils flared when she picked up a tempting warm and musky scent. He shifted his legs, not too subtly adjusting a bulge in his crotch. She repressed a grin when his cheeks colored. Her body involuntarily reacted, the spot between her legs warming and swelling.

His eyes widened as he looked at her. Now it was her turn to blush.

“Do you have any hobbies?” he asked, smoothing his hair.

Good distraction, Rone. Switch to hobbies, so maybe my girl boner will go away. They needed to think about something else before she was tempted to straddle him right there in front of his family.

“Other than taking care of dogs? I like photography.” Until she’d cracked her camera lens, that is. Her dream had once been to start her own pet photography studio, but that was put on hold because dreams didn’t pay bills.

“What’s your favorite food?” He licked his full lips.

She wondered how those lips would feel sucking her pussy. She shook her head, trying to push wicked thoughts of Rone out of her mind. “I like all food.”

He eagerly nodded. “Me, too.”

Her stomach rumbled, reminding her she’d only had a granola bar for breakfast and she’d refused to take a lunch break. “I think hamburgers are my favorite, with fries and a strawberry milkshake.” She could go for a hamburger at the moment, smothered in bacon and onions and dipped in lots of ketchup.

“I’ll have to make you my famous moose burgers and seasoned fries.”

She frowned. Though moose burgers sounded delicious, she worried that her mates would probably expect her to be skilled in the kitchen when she wasn’t busy popping out their babies. “I’m not a very good cook.”

He flashed a broad grin. “Don’t worry. I can teach you.”

She couldn’t help but smile back. He was so cute, so sweet. Maybe having him for a mate wouldn’t be such a bad thing. She liked Luc and Hakon, too. If only they didn’t come with Drasko.

“You cook a lot?” she asked, absently petting her dogs.

He puffed up his chest. “Hakon and Drasko kill ’em, and I grill ’em.”

She wondered if Hakon and Drasko killed them in wolf form or if they hunted as humans with guns. The thought of Drasko with a gun didn’t sit well with her, and then she sucked in a sharp breath when she remembered she’d blacked out right after he said he was going to rip apart her father. “Is your brother really going to kill my dad?”

“Nah.” His amber eyes danced with laughter. “Drasko talks out his ass when he’s pissed. Typical second alpha. I’m Rone.” He jutted a thumb in his chest. “I’m the youngest of the pack. We didn’t have a proper introduction earlier.”

“That’s okay.” She bit her lip as an overwhelming desire to run her tongue over the dimples in his cheeks and across his full lips came over her. “I caught your name from Luc.”

“You’re very pretty,” he blurted.

Heat flamed her face like wildfire. “Thanks.”

The tracker turned to them, nostrils flaring. “No flirting.”

Rone shrugged. “I can’t help it.”

The older man arched a brow. “Do we need to trade places?”

“No, sir.” Rone frowned, then nodded to the front seat. “Those are my dads. Tor, the alpha of our family, like my brother Hakon, and Van, the tracker, like my brother Luc.

She thought it odd how he called them both his fathers and not his uncles. They couldn’t be his true fathers. She smiled at the men up front, not surprised when they returned her smile with stony looks. They didn’t seem unfriendly, though, just on edge. Was it because of her?

“Rone,” Amara said, “I don’t know anything about packs. Can you explain them to me?” She didn’t want him getting into trouble and having to switch places with one of his stern fathers.

“Okay.” He shrugged. “Most packs have three or four brothers. The strong packs have two alphas. We’re the strongest pack in our tribe, because we have two alphas and the best tracker.”

Tor loudly cleared his throat, clutching the steering wheel with white knuckles and giving Rone a stern look in the rearview mirror. “Second strongest.”

“Sorry.” He bit his lip, sharing a sly look with Amara. “Second strongest after our dads’ pack. You already know Luc is the tracker. We call trackers betas.”

“He said he’s in the Army.”

“He just got back from a tour in Afghanistan. We were celebrating his safe return when he caught your scent.” Rone’s eyes widened. “Drasko beat the crap out of him, trying to restrain him. He thought Luc had gone lone wolf.”

She grimaced. “Luc told me.” One more reason she wasn’t fond of Drasko.

“My dads and brothers chained him up for three days, thinking they could subdue him. He faked being better and then he escaped.”

Luc hadn’t told her he’d been chained up for three days. That’s how he must have gotten those welts on his wrists. She felt bad for giving him a hard time after what he’d been through.

“Hakon is the oldest,” Rone continued. “He’s first alpha. Drasko is second alpha. They both work in the oil fields. Hakon is a foreman, so we have lots of money. If you need us to buy you anything, just let us know.”

“I have my own money, thanks.” She straightened. Why was he offering to buy her stuff? Had he noticed her tattered clothes? Her secondhand camera? She didn’t have nice things, but her dogs ate the best food, and she had an important job. “And what is your role in the pack?”

He puffed up his chest again, looking so adorably sexy, she had to fight the desire to climb on top of him and kiss him senseless. “I’m a gamma. My job is to stay home with you, help raise our offspring, and keep you sexually satisfied.”

“Dammit, Rone!” Tor bellowed so loudly, the dogs cowered and whimpered while Amara covered their ears.

“Sorry.” He grinned sheepishly. “It just slipped out. I don’t talk to girls except for our mother and sister.”

She covered her mouth to hide a smile. “I can tell.”

“I was starting to think we’d never find our mate,” he continued, his eyes lighting up like a kid in a candy store. “We should’ve found you like three years ago.”

“Oh.” She wondered how different her life would have been if that had happened. She wouldn’t have Gremlin and Scrooge if she hadn’t moved to that clinic near Portland. How sad her life would’ve been without them. They’d been abandoned at the vet’s office, neglected and mistreated. Even though the past three years had been sort of hellish, she still didn’t regret her detour to Alaska. She and the dogs had been homeless for almost a month at one point, living out of her run-down car while she searched for work, but she’d managed to keep her little family together, and the low points in her life had only made her stronger.

Rone licked his lips and rubbed his hands together, as if she was a slab of prime rib and he was a starving wolf. “Your hair looks so soft, and your eyes shine like diamonds.”

“That’s it!”

She gasped, clutching her dogs, when Tor slammed on the brakes.

Rone’s hand flew across Amara’s breasts, stopping her when she lurched forward. She thought his gesture was gallant, though she wondered if he was also interested in copping a feel, because his fingers dug into her flesh, lingering a little too long. Not that she minded. In all honesty, it felt rather good being branded by his thick fingers. When the truck finally skidded to a stop, he pulled back, giving her an apologetic smile.

“What are you doing?” Rone pleaded as his alpha father put the truck in park.

Tor unstrapped his seatbelt, shooting Rone a look that made him cringe. “You’re riding with your brothers.”

“I’ll behave,” Rone begged. “I promise.”

Van’s nostrils flared, and he shared a knowing look with Tor. “You’re reacting to her scent. You think we can’t smell it?”

“I can’t help it,” Rone whimpered. “She’s the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen.”

“Get out and bring her Lab here.” Tor jutted a finger toward the door. “Go!”

Rone gave her one last apologetic look before slipping off his seatbelt and stumbling out the door. Her heart plummeted as he slunk like a dog with his tail between his legs to the truck parked behind them.

She was bummed she wouldn't have anyone to talk to. She loved her big affectionate Lab, but she craved Rone's company. He made her laugh, and he was so cute. A mild breeze from outside hit her, the smell of diesel fuel accosting her senses as a bus drove by. She wondered if it was heading to Anchorage. And then a thought struck her. She couldn't be that far from the clinic. If she and the dogs bolted now, they could be back home by nightfall. She clutched the gemstone around her neck. The temptation to rip it off, shift, and run was powerful.

“Don't even consider it. You think six wolves can't track you?” Van's sharp gaze practically bored holes through her skull.

How'd he known what she was thinking?

“Once we get to the reservation,” Tor said, “we're contacting your father's family and finding out what the hell happened.”

“You know how to reach my father?”

“Of course,” Van answered, tapping his nose. “It won't be hard.”

She remembered Drasko's promise. She didn't want him hurting her father. Plus, she wasn't so sure he would want to hear from his bastard she-wolf, and the thought of being rejected by him filled her with shame and dread. She hung her head. “I don't think that's a good idea.”

Tor drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Your father must face judgment for what he's done to you.”

“I don't want anyone getting in trouble over me.” She toyed with the smooth tips of Gremlin's pointy ears. “I don't think he knew about me.”

“Amara, sex outside our species, outside our marriage bonds, is forbidden.” Van leaned towards her, so close she had no choice but to look into his eyes, surprised and relieved when she didn’t see him judging her.

“If it hadn’t been for Luc,” he continued, “you might have never been found. Then you and my sons would’ve lived lonely lives without mates or children.”

She gasped at that. “Your sons couldn’t have found another mate?”

Van shared another look with Tor. “The Ancients pick only one mate for us. If we never find her, we never marry. Your father was bound to someone else when he slept with your mother. He broke a sacred bond. He needs to atone for what he did to you and his designated mate.”

She looked away, hating how Van’s eyes pierced her, as if he was looking into her soul. “He didn’t do anything to me.”

“The women in our culture are to be cherished and protected. Tell me, Amara.” The lines around Tor’s eyes tightened as he looked at Amara in the rearview mirror. “Have you ever been cherished and protected?”

She pulled her dogs close and looked out the back window. Drasko was heaving Buster into his arms as if he weighed no more than a toy poodle. “That’s a very personal question.”

“Never mind.” Tor’s voice was laced with pity. “I have my answer.”

There was nothing she loathed more than being the object of pity. She’d been pitied nearly her entire life by people who made comments about her thrift-store clothes.

She hadn’t always been unloved. Cathi had abandoned her in infancy, so Amara had been raised by two loving and kind grandparents. If their health hadn’t failed, she’d still be living at their farm, but Grandpa died of lung cancer and then Grandma succumbed to a stroke a few years later.

Her grandma had adored her. She’d taught her how to sew and plant and tend to a garden. She’d fashioned Amara’s hair in two braids with ribbons, and she took her for ice cream

every Friday after school. Emotion welled up as she remembered her poor grandma's final moments, stroking Amara's face, telling her to be strong. "My grandmother cherished me," she answered, too choked up to say more.

Tor arched a brow. "Where is she now?"

"She died when I was eleven." She rested her chin on top of Gremlin's head. "How will you find my father?" Worry gnawed her gut like a dog with a bone.

"His tribe's chieftain will root him out," Tor said, "but I suspect I know the family."

"You do?" She'd thought she'd never get the chance to meet her father, and this man was saying he could find him.

"Yes." Tor scowled. "The Ancients never gifted them with a daughter. Now I know why."

Drasko set Buster down beside her. "This slobber bucket is missing his mother."

"Hey, Buster." She wrapped her arms around her best friend's neck, refusing to look at Drasko. Buster coated her face with wet, sloppy kisses, his tail slapping the back of the seat.

"I'm sorry if I upset you." Drasko leaned into the cab, filling her space with the scent of raw male power. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she answered curtly, turning away from him. He made no promises not to hurt her father, which meant he wasn't really sorry. When Drasko slammed the door and marched back to the truck behind them, she heaved a sigh of relief. She was in no mood to deal with his mantrums.

After Tor put the truck in drive and pulled back out on the highway, she sat quietly, holding onto her dogs like they were lifelines and wishing for her small, moldy bed at the clinic. She didn't want them seeking out her dad, and not just because she feared for his life. After the hell Cathi had put her through, she couldn't handle another rejection. Not from anyone, and especially not from her father.

* * *

Hakon knew Rone wouldn't last long in the truck with Amara. The pup had been salivating ever since he'd caught her scent on the way into Anchorage. Now that his brothers were together again, they had to make things right with Luc.

He cleared his throat, alternating between keeping his eyes on the road and watching Luc in the rearview mirror. "We owe you an apology."

Luc crossed his arms, his face lengthening and his black eyes looking far worse after three days of sleep deprivation. "I'm waiting."

"Bro," Hakon said. "I'm sorry for doubting you."

If Luc hadn't fought them off and escaped, they might never have found Amara. The thought made his stomach twist with guilt and dread. Luc was not as big or strong as his brothers, but thank the Ancients he was faster, slipping away when Drasko lost control and turned on Hakon. By the time Hakon had calmed Drasko and gathered his wits, Luc was long gone, following Amara's scent. How was Hakon supposed to know there was a lone female out there in the human world? It had never happened before. When trackers thought they scented their missing mates, it was usually a sign they were going crazy after suffering too long. Their mate should have come into heat years ago, relieving them of their perpetual boners, but she was nowhere to be found. Hakon had feared that their destined mate was from Romania, killed by poachers when she was young. That tribe had the highest mortality rate, for their country had been plagued by uprisings and unregulated hunting.

Drasko, who sat beside Hakon, turned to Luc with a cross between a grimace and a smile. "I'm sorry for punching you in the face."

Rone elbowed Luc, frowning. "Me, too."

Rone didn't have as much to be sorry about though. He'd tried to get Hakon and Drasko to listen to Luc. If only they'd trusted him.

“We owe you one,” Hakon said, studying the hard angles of Luc’s face in the rearview. “I mean it.”

Luc nodded. “You do.”

“Just name it.” Hakon swallowed hard, worrying he’d given Luc an open invitation to claim first rights with Amara.

Luc leaned back. “Let me think about it.”

Drasko swore beside him. “I’m going to kill her father.”

“Bro, don’t say that around her,” Hakon admonished. “It upsets her.”

The last time his brother said it, Amara fainted. Hakon was thankful for Rone’s quick reflexes. The pup had caught her, then carried her to their fathers’ truck, refusing to climb out of the truck after that. Their fathers had let him stay, saying it would be best if Amara woke to a friendly face. Rone had obviously gotten a little too friendly. Not even ten minutes into their trip, and he was slinking back to their truck, his massive boner pointing at them like a sideways flagpole, threatening to bust the seam of his jeans.

Poor pup, but at least he’d gotten to spend time alone with her. Too bad Hakon, the leader of their pack and possibly the future leader of the entire tribe, was too afraid to be alone with her. Not because he feared what she’d do to him, but what he’d do to her. He’d wanted to bend her over and ram his dick up her with a primal roar the moment he’d laid eyes on her. Not to mention his inner beast threatened to break out whenever she was near, and not the loyal protector beast, but the one who ripped pines out by the roots, hurling them down the mountain. He’d waited for her too long.

Hakon’s gut churned. “What about her mother?” he asked.

Hakon cringed at Luc’s audible sigh. “She said her mother abused her.”

The crunch of steel filled their cabin when Drasko punched the roof. “This keeps getting worse,” he roared. “She’s next.”

Hakon scowled at the fist-sized dent above his head. “Control your rage, Drasko,” he warned.

Drasko shot him a dark look and subsided.

“The Ancients already took care of the mother,” Luc said. “She died of cancer.”

“A kinder punishment than I would’ve chosen,” Drasko mumbled. “What do you think about her ability to diagnose animals?”

“Father said his great-grandmother had the same gift,” Luc said. “She knew their sickness just by touching them.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know of any she-wolf with that power now.” Hakon struggled to understand the significance of Amara’s ability. Why had ancient magical powers faded only to return with a she-wolf who’d been raised by humans? “I don’t think it’s a coincidence she’s named after our goddess and has ancient powers.”

“If the Ancients had a hand in it,” Rone said and rattled Hakon’s seat, “why would they let humans raise her?”

Hakon shook his head. “I’m not sure.”

“Do you think she’s a virgin?” Rone asked.

“I don’t know.” Hakon grimaced. “And I don’t want to think about it.” If she wasn’t, they’d have to improvise during the wedding ritual, which would be awkward, and pointless, too. He wasn’t even sure if the bonding would work if a human had taken her virginity. He’d had enough encounters with humans to know that sex in their world was oftentimes done with random strangers as a means of release. He prayed to the Ancients that Amara was untouched, because the thought of another man touching her made his blood boil.

“I’ll kill any humans who touched her,” Drasko seethed.

“Bro,” Hakon spoke through gritted teeth, “you need to control your temper.”

“Don’t tell me to control my temper.” Drasko clenched his hair by the roots, looking ready to rip it out of his head. “This is fucked up.”

The tension in the cab was getting so thick, Hakon could feel the weight of it pressing down on his chest.

“Relax, bros.” Luc chuckled. “I smelled her virginity.”

Hakon, Drasko, and Rone heaved simultaneous groans of relief.

Hakon looked at Luc in the rearview, forcing a smile. “Thank you, brother. I will never doubt your nose again. I didn’t know you could pick up a scent that far.”

Luc flashed a crooked smile, the circles under his eyes looking more pronounced. “Neither did I.”

“You’re tired,” Hakon said, again nearly consumed by guilt for what they’d put Luc through. “You need to sleep.”

“I don’t know if I can.” Luc’s eyelids grew heavy.

“She’s safe now, thanks to you,” Hakon added. “Get some rest.”

“Yeah.” Rone rubbed his hands together, bouncing in his seat. “We’ll need our strength for the honeymoon.”

Hakon inwardly cringed. “I don’t think that will happen for a while.”

“What?” Rone whimpered. “Why?”

“She’s scared,” Hakon answered, tired of trying to calm his brothers but mostly just tired. “We’re not taking her until she’s ready.”

Rone wiped a bead of sweat off his brow. “I smelled her desire. She was ready to jump my bones.”

“I smelled it, too.” Hakon tensed, trying to push the tempting scent of her out of his mind. “I’m talking about her mind, not her body.”

“But she wants to mate with us,” Rone pleaded.

Hakon shook his head. “Girls are more complicated than that.”

“What do *you* know about girls?”

Hakon ignored Drasko’s jab. His brother was looking for a fight, but Hakon was sick of fighting. He still felt like ten shades of bear shit for what they’d done to Luc. “We’re going

to have to wait. I have to get back to work, and her family will want us to wait, too.”

Hakon had already taken too much time off. If he didn't get back soon, he'd lose his foreman position. The money was too good to let go, especially now that they'd be starting a family soon.

“Her family doesn't get a say,” Drasko hissed.

“If her fathers are who I think they are, her grandfathers are tribe elders.” Hakon did his best to keep his tone even. “They will have a say.”

“Damn.” Rone kicked the back of his seat like a toddler throwing a tantrum. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

Hakon didn't have to look behind him to know his brother's boner still hadn't gone down. He caught Rone's reflection in the rearview mirror, amused by the desperation in his big, sad eyes. “I'll carve a hole in a tree for you.”

That elicited chuckles from his other brothers, which was good, because the tension in their cab was as thick as a ten-foot snow drift. Everyone needed a good laugh, but mostly, they needed to calm the fuck down.

Chapter Three

Sometime during the long, boring ride to the reservation, Amara fell asleep. She knew she was stuck in a dream, yet it felt so real. She was in a one-room cabin in the middle of the woods and completely naked, lying spread-eagled on a large mattress. Hakon and Drasko had her legs pinned down, her head was in Rone's lap, and Luc's head was between her legs. At first, he was just trailing kisses up and down her inner thighs, stopping a breath away from that sensitive juncture before blowing on her desire.

She licked her lips with a groan, pushing upward with her elbows and thrusting her crotch in his face. He latched onto her, digging into the globes of her ass and then burying his tongue deep inside her before pulling out to lap up her juices with one blessedly long stroke of the tongue. Then he plunged again.

Rone leaned over her, planting delicate kisses across her chin and lips while Hakon and Drasko squeezed her breasts. She whimpered when Luc toyed with her swollen, sensitive nub and Drasko pinched her nipple between his teeth, extending it before releasing and sucking her breast. The more Luc stroked and licked, the more an agonizing yet delightful sensation built deep inside her, threatening to explode. Despite her cries for mercy, they continued to lick, probe, and touch, holding her captive to the growing swell of desire.

One final stroke of Luc's tongue sent her soaring and then tumbling over the edge, a beat deep inside her pounding against his tongue in sweet, euphoric release. It was a sensation unlike anything she'd ever imagined, so pure and so perfect. She panted Luc's name between each contraction. She went boneless, sinking into the mattress while they continued to shower her with touches and kisses. She heaved a sigh of contentment, then gasped when Luc and Hakon switched places. Hakon's gaze bored into her with such intensity, she was compelled to look away. Holy heck! Were they going to torture her again? She certainly hoped so.

Rone showered her face with sloppy licks. She tried pushing him away when his tongue darted up her nose. His face had turned into a long muzzle. Was he shifting? And why did he look like Buster? She swatted him again, calling for Hakon when he faded away.

She woke with a start, Buster nuzzling her cheek.

“Get off me,” she grumbled, pushing him away.

The truck had stopped, and she could hear the voices of her mates outside. She peered over the seat of the cab, looking straight at her mates’ dads.

“Have a good nap?” Tor smirked.

Holy shitfire! Had she cried out in her sleep? Did they know she’d had a wet dream?

Van and Tor nudged each other, sharing knowing looks.

“We’ll leave you alone for a minute,” Van said, avoiding her eyes as he and Tor slipped out of the truck.

They knew.

She wanted to die.

She panicked when she looked down at the wide bull’s-eye that had soaked the crotch of her work scrubs. She felt moisture in her panties. She pushed Gremlin away when he tried to sniff her crotch.

She reached for the backpack on the floor, yanking it out from under the front seat. She was relieved to see her jeans and clean panties stuffed inside, along with her few worldly possessions, including her broken digital camera.

She stole a glance outside. Her mates’ dads were pushing them away as they tried to approach the truck. Ignoring her dogs’ whimpers to go outside, she thanked her lucky stars the truck had tinted windows. She quickly stripped off her soaked clothes and slipped on new panties and her jeans. As she laced her shoes back up, she made a mental note not to sleep the rest of the trip and risk another erotic dream. This was her only pair of jeans. She balled up her wet clothes and shoved them in the bottom of her backpack.

She looked out the window again. Rone was shifting from foot to foot, impatiently peering around his dads. Hakon was leaning against the side of the truck, looking exhausted. Drasko and Luc were staring straight at her, nostrils flared.

She quickly averted her gaze, focusing on the flashing yellow-and-red restaurant sign and the other vehicles parked in the lot. Luc's truck was at the end of the lot. The older federal agent was in the driver's seat. The black truck with the tinted windows was parked next to him. Did these feds go everywhere the wolves went and the wolves were okay with that? They even let the feds drive their trucks? This situation was weirder than weird.

Leaning over the seat, she checked her hair in the mirror, dismayed to see it looked like a bird's nest. She located a brush in her backpack and tried to make her ponytail more manageable, then she found a bottle of expensive vanilla-scented lotion, a gift from one of her clients after she'd found a small tumor in the dog's lung. She loved that lotion but used it sparingly, because she knew she could never afford to replace it. She thought of the hungry wolves outside and realized she'd need to use a lot to mask the smell of her desire. She lathered it up over her arms and neck, then lifted her shirt and rubbed it into her belly before quickly smearing it around her bikini line. She sure hoped it was enough.

She was still majorly humiliated over the whole erotic experience. She'd never had a wet dream in her life. Heck, she'd never even had sex or sexual urges for that matter. Of all the times for her libido to awaken. She'd always hoped one day she'd find a mate, and her first orgasm would be with him. Instead, her first orgasm had been in front of two old dudes and three dogs.

How fucking embarrassing.

She pushed open the truck door, letting Buster jump down after her. Then she picked up the little dogs, holding them against her chest like a furry barrier as she walked past the men and deposited the dogs on a grassy embankment by the side of the road. While they marked their territory, she

impatiently tapped her foot, cringing when Luc approached, nostrils still flaring.

He flashed a devastatingly sexy grin. “Vanilla, huh?”

“Yeah.” She shrugged, looking away.

He scooted closer, his voice dropping to a sultry whisper. “So what was the dream about?”

She turned from him. “None of your fucking business.”

“It’s natural to go into heat when you find your mates,” he said to her back. “That’s how you know we’re the ones.”

Her chest tightened. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Not to us,” he said, his voice changing from sultry to soothing. “It’s flattering. Believe me, I’ll be having a similar dream tonight.” His eyes smoldered like twin suns while heat radiated off his body.

He leaned into her, his dark, rich scent hitting her like a brick to the head and making her libido spring to life once more. Holy shitballs, she so wanted to straddle him.

A wicked grin split his face in two. “You gonna tell me what it was about?”

Her knees nearly buckled when a wave of lust washed over her and moisture filled her panties. Oh, no! She couldn’t soak her only pair of jeans. She fidgeted with the hem of her shirt, glancing at the others. His brothers were watching them like a pack of circling vultures. His dads were pointing at the restaurant.

“Your dads are waving to us,” she said, trying to pull away when he latched onto her elbow. Even her dogs were ready to go, sitting impatiently by her feet.

He pulled her to his side. “Just tell me.”

She leaned into him as her legs went boneless. She felt caught in his web of desire, unable to break free. “Your brothers were holding me down and you were licking me,” she finally admitted.

“Where?” he rasped, his breath tickling her ear.

Heat flamed her face as more moisture soaked her panties. “You know where.” Her knees nearly gave way when his lips grazed the tip of her ear.

“Did you enjoy it?”

“You know I did.”

“I’m going to do my best to live up to that dream, Amara.” He squeezed her arm, then laced his fingers through hers, sending a jolt of lust right to that sweet spot between her thighs. Soon she’d need extra-absorbent adult diapers to control the gushing.

She pulled away, shaking him off as if his hand was on fire. “Who says I’ll let you?”

“Oh, you’ll let me.” His rumble sent a shiver coursing down her spine. “You’ll be begging for it.”

She quickly scooped up her dogs, racing for the truck without a backward glance. She did her best to ignore his laughter. What a jerk. Did he think making her gush was funny? Seriously, what a major asshole. She despised him for getting her all hot and bothered, acting as if his flirting was some kind of joke. But mostly she despised him because he was right. She so wanted him to lick between her thighs again, but this time for real. And then she wanted him to fuck her. Heck, she wanted all his brothers to fuck her. Even the jerk, Drasko. Especially the jerk, Drasko. If they didn’t mate soon, she would have to beg for it. She wanted these wolves so damn badly, it hurt.

Enjoy the sample? Get book one in my complete shifter series here: <https://amzn.to/3M5ocyW>

Books by Tara West

Court of Fae and Firelight

[Heart of Her Wolves](#)

[Revenge of Her Wolves](#)

[Rage of Her Ravens](#)

Madness of Her Mages

Calling of Her Court

[**Eternally Yours**](#)

[Divine and Dateless](#)

[Damned and Desirable](#)

[Damned and Desperate](#)

[Demonic and Deserted](#)

[Dead and Delicious](#)

[**Dawn of the Dragon Queen Saga**](#)

[Dragon Song](#)

[Dragon Storm](#)

[**Keepers of the Stones**](#)

[Witch Flame, Prelude](#)

[Curse of the Ice Dragon](#)

[Spirit of the Sea Witch](#)

[Scorn of the Sky Goddess](#)

[**Hungry for Her Wolves Series**](#)

[Hungry for Her Wolves](#)

[Longing for Her Wolves](#)

[Desperate for Her Wolves](#)

[Tempted by Her Wolves](#)

[Fighting for Her Wolves](#)

[Fated for Her Wolves](#)

[Defending Her Wolves](#)

[Saving Her Wolves](#)

[Hungry for Her Demon Wolves](#)

[Captured by Her Demon Wolves](#)

[Hunted by Her Demon Wolves](#)

[Protected by Her Wolves](#)

[**Academy for Misfit Witches Series**](#)

[Academy for Misfit Witches](#)

[School for Stolen Secrets](#)

[Academy for Courting Curses](#)

[**The Fae Queen's Warriors Series**](#)

[The Fae Queen's Warriors](#)

[The Fae Queen's Captors](#)

[The Fae Queen's Saviors](#)

About Tara West



Tara West writes books about dragons, witches, and handsome heroes while eating chocolate, lots and lots of chocolate. She's willing to share her dragons, witches, and heroes. Keep your hands off her chocolate. A former high school English teacher, Tara is now a full-time writer and graphic artist. She enjoys spending time with her family, interacting with her fans, fostering for her local rabbit rescue, and fishing the Texas coast.

Awards include:

2018, USA Today Bestselling Author

Dragon Song, Grave Ellis 2015 Readers Choice Award,
Favorite Fantasy Romance

Divine and Dateless, 2015 eFestival of Words, Best Romance

Damned and Desirable, 2014 Coffee Time Romance Book of
the Year

Sophie's Secret, selected by The Duff and Paranormal V
Activity movies and Wattpad recommended reading lists

Curse of the Ice Dragon, Best Action/Adventure 2013
eFestival of Words

Hang out with her on her Facebook fan page at:
<https://www.facebook.com/tarawestauthor>

Or check out her website: www.tarawest.com

She loves to hear from her readers at:
tarawestwriter@gmail.com

Court of Fae and Firelight

Glossary

Abyssus – Southernmost stronghold in Delfi bordering the Periculian Forest, home of Draevyn, Blaze, and Nikkos Inferni

Adrean – Surviving lycan king

Arabella – (Lady Arabella) Niece to Duke Viggo and obsessed with marrying Helian, demon possessed by Empusa, cruel

Asher Lykaios – Finn’s brother, son of the fallen shifter kings, Tarianya’s wolf shifter mate (the dominant one), father to Ember and Aurora, and Helian’s half-brother

Aurora – Daughter of Tarianya, Finn, and Asher, twin sister to Ember, age four, teleporter

Beatrix – Tarianya’s female wyvern protector

Beau – Anya’s male wyvern protector (deceased)

Bertram – Fire mage in Malvolia’s army, brother to Mantus and Sol, demon possessed, one of Malvolia’s lovers

Blaze Inferni – Fire mage in Malvolia’s army and second born brother to Draevyn and Nikkos, and mate to Shirina, gifted with supernatural speed

Bridget – Tween shifter and barmaid, Eide’s cousin

Bjorn – Dead bear shifter and Mrs. Euphemia’s mate

Caldaria – Country that King Fachnan rules

Cassandra Ariadne Celsus – Helian, Asher, and Finn’s mother and former queen of Caldaria

Chara Inferni – Late Lady of Abyssus, gifted with fertility magic, wife to Lord Tobias, and mother to Draevyn, Blaze, and Nikkos

Claudette – Human who died from fever and whose likeness was used to conceal Anya, sister to Lydia

Cotulla flowers – Used to heal the sick and grown in the Periculan Mountains

Crispin Otto Orvyn Kloopenhoof – Cook and Mrs. Euphemia's brother

Cyrene – Southernmost port in Caldaria

Delfi – Country that Malvolia rules

Demon – Taryana's pet rabbit

Derrick Fortis – Duke of Elisi Taryana and Shirina's father and Flora's surviving mate

Draevyn Inferni – Fire mage in Malvolia's army, Lord of Abyssus, oldest brother to Nikkos and Blaze and Shirina's mate, and gifted with the power to slow time

Dunhull – The satyr village

Egil – Malvolia's lover

Eide – Helian's wolf-shifter lover from Cyrene

Elisi – Dukedom of Marius and Derrick Fortis

Ember – Daughter of Taryana, Finn, and Asher, twin sister to Aurora, age four, clairvoyant

Empusa – Lady Arabella's demon name

Erdna – Anya's pretend human mother and real mother to Rose and Lily

Fachnan Viscera-Celsus – Cruel Sidhe Fae King of Caldaria

Fallax – A chain of islands off the Western shore, a sanctuary for wyverns

Finn Lykaios – Asher's brother, son of the fallen shifter kings, Taryana's wolf shifter mate (the sweet one), father to Ember and Aurora, and Helian's half-brother

Flora Avias – Delfian princess, Malvolia's twin, and Anya and Taryana's mother with the power of masking magic

Fortis – Strongest plant that thrives on sanitae, pultes, and oregano

Gadea – Head priestess of Kyan’s Temple and Cassandra’s lover

Harald – Winged dragon rider

Helena – The warden of Ulula

Helian Ariadne-Celsus – Fae prince, dragon rider, and Tarianya’s mate

Ingrid – Human child fell from the tree. Sister to Linnea

Inretius – Flowers used to trap spirits or bring back the dead

Itaria – Centaur stronghold

Ivar – Captain of Fachnan’s elite dragon riders

Kylar – Dead beta lycan king and father to Asher and Finn

Letalis – A deadly flower used to make poison

Linnea – Human child, sister to Ingrid

Lord Derrick Avias – Anya and Shirina’s father and Flora’s husband

Luci – Toadface, human servant, Lady Arabella’s maid and later Tarianya’s maid, and then even later the secret identity of Flora Avias

Lupine – Wolf-shifter village that was destroyed by Fachnan’s dragon army

Lydia – Wind witch and sister to the deceased Claudette

Lynette – Satyr wife to Zars

Malvolia Avias – The sorceress queen, ruler of Delfi, twin sister to Flora, and aunt to Shirina and Tarianya

Mantus – Fire mage general in Malvolia’s army, killed in book one by Helian and Tarianya. Malvolia’s former lover. Brother to Sol and Bertram.

Marius Fortis – Duke of Elisi. Derrick’s twin and Flora’s mate. Presumed dead

Mrs. Euphemia – Kind nursemaid, satyr, sister to Cook

Naraka – type of succubi unable to be detected by dragons

Nox – Helian’s demon

Nikkos Inferni– Fire mage in Malvolia’s army, youngest brother to Blaze and Draevyn, Shirina’s mate, and gifted with the power of healing

Oliver – Stableboy and Luci’s beau

Peloponese – Capital of Caldaria

Periculian Mountains – Divide the magical and the human lands, and home of the trolls

Radnor – Helian’s very grumpy dragon

Ravini Fae – More commonly from the country of Delfi, one of the two races of noble Fae, tanned skin and dark eyes, tapered ears, the males have birdlike wings and can shoot fire, and many of the females are witches

Romulus – Captain of the Windhaven guard, 300 years old, silvery wings and hair

Rose – Ghost child who was mauled by a bear (daughter to Erdna and sister to Lily)

Sanatio – Herb used to treat infection

Satyr – A half human, half fawn/goat with furry goat legs and ears and a human face and speech

Seiki Stone – A killing stone that resembles an egg, can collect white magic and be used as a devastating bomb capable of wiping out entire cities

Selig – Fachnan’s gray mage

Shirina – Gifted with the siren’s call, aunt to Ember and Aurora, mate to Draevyn, Blaze, and Nikkos, daughter to Flora, Derrick, and Marius, sister to Tariana, and niece to Malvolia

Skullgrove – Decaying human town in Caldaria

Sidhe Fae – More commonly from the country of Caldaria, one of the two races of noble Fae, usually with pale eyes, hair, and skin, tapered ears, and many are dragon riders

Silas – Satyr son of Zars

Sirensshade – An herb that makes people horny

Sol – Fire mage in Malvolia’s army, brother to Mantus and Bertram, demon possessed, one of Malvolia’s lovers

Sortis – A flower with amorous properties

Taryana, Tari, Anya – White witch, mother to Ember and Aurora, mate to Finn, Asher, and Helian, daughter to Flora, Derrick, and Marius, sister to Shirina, and niece to Malvolia

Terrae – Inferior Fae, the peasants of the Fae world – shifters, satyrs, dwarfs, pixies, basically any magical creature that wasn’t either a monster or one of the beautiful blessed Fae with long, graceful necks and tapered ears.

Thebes – Capital of Delfi

Thesan – Dangerous, remote island nearly impossible to reach by boat unless you are a native navigator. Also easy to get lost by air.

Thorin – Mind-spinner, Anya’s pretend father

Thunderstone – indestructible stone

Three Rivers – The intersection dividing Eastern Caldaria (Noble Fae territory) and Western Caldaria (Terrae/lesser Fae/human territory)

Toadface – Lady Arabella’s maid Luci

Tobias Inferni – Late Lord of Abyssus, husband to Lady Chara and father to Draevyn, Blaze, and Nikkos

Tribus Point – The intersection on the Northern Shore where the three countries Delfi, Caldaria, and Windhaven meet

Ulula – New shifter stronghold in Windhaven

Ventus – Capital of Windhaven

Venenum root – Deadly, demon plant grows in the Werewood forest

Viggo – (Duke Nathen Viggo) Ruler of Windhaven, the neutral territory, demon possessed by Zomok, Lady Arabella’s lover and uncle, cruel

Werewood Forest – At the base of the Periculian Mountains on the human side, a forest teeming with demons and man-eating plants.

Windhaven – Duke Viggo's lands

Zars – Satyr trader and good friend to Helian

Zomok – Duke Viggo's demon name