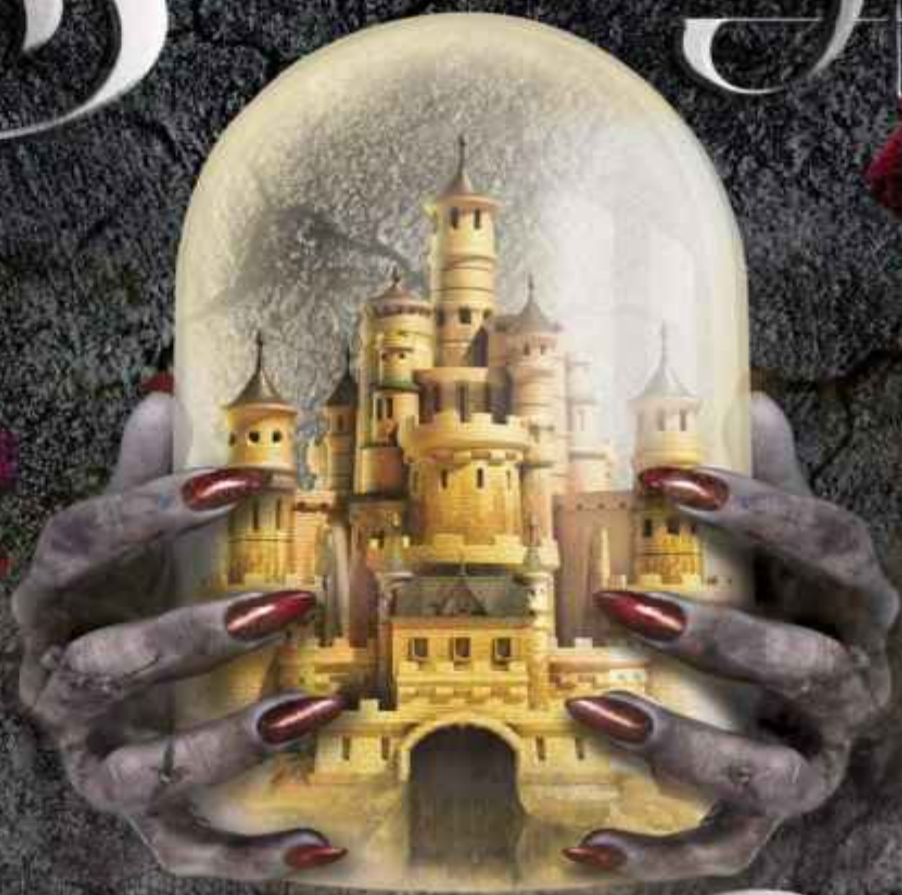


BOOK TWO

STOLEN



KINGDOM

INTERNATIONAL BEST SELLING AUTHOR

SARA SNOW

STOLEN KINGDOM

BOOK 2 OF THE SHATTERED KINGDOM
TRILOGY

BRYAN TOPSCHER

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PROLOGUE: ALMON

I clutched my dear newborn in my arms, bringing her closer to my chest.

Her frail breathing against my clothes was my only reminder that she was still clinging to life.

Desperation filled my bones.

My sweet little Sophia...

The village doctor had told us she wouldn't last the week with such a weak heart, but I refused to believe that.

There was a strength in her that he was underestimating.

My feet trudged through the thick mud under the main bridge that led into the village.

Always after heavy rain, the streets would get like this.

I had hoped Sophia would one day be old enough to get to play in the mud and just be a kid. I could see it now.

Bright red rain boots caked with thick mud, sticking to the street like glue as the rain trickled down on her head.

Her mother would then give me a stern talk when we returned home, fussing over how she'd get sick.

I wanted to have those moments with her ... more than anything.

She deserved to live.

"You there," a faint, craggy voice called out to me as I traversed the underbridge.

I had almost made it to the other side. I was only a few steps away from the dreary gray sunlight the day offered. I was so close. Looking back now, I should have run for that light and never looked back. But fraught with exhaustion and desperation as I'd been at that moment, I halted and turned around without thinking.

My eyes met with an older woman who stood hunched over, clutching some sort of cane. Her features were lost on me as it was too dark to see her perfectly.

“Yes, dear. You. Come, come. We don't have much time, do we?” She beckoned me over in a way that drew me to her.

I turned my foot, preparing myself to leave. I was so close.

“I can help you if you'll let me.” Her words seemed more urgent now. “Your baby doesn't have much time left.”

“How do you know?” The words barely left my mouth.

My breath was shallow as I took a step toward her.

“Good sir, I know a great many things,” she crooned as a saccharine smile ran across her face.

The sticky saliva coating the inside of her lips clicked and popped as they pulled away from her yellow-stained teeth.

The hairs on my arms stood on end with revulsion and the overwhelming urge to flee, but I resisted. My jaw tensed as I looked down at my little girl.

If there was the slightest possibility this old woman knew about something that could help, shouldn't I at least hear her out?

As I glanced up at the crone again, she had emerged from the shadows. It was as if all oxygen had dissipated from the air around me in an instant.

Her beady eyes were locked to mine as she said, “Don't you want to save your daughter?”

SOPHIA

*M*y whole body ached.

The lacerations on my hands deepened as I tried to claw through the thick vines before me. There was a strange magic here that was preventing me from moving deeper into the Forest of Sorrows.

My eyes burned as more tears dripped down my cheeks. Again and again, my rough sleeve wiped them away.

I had to find my way through. I couldn't give up. I needed to know that he was okay... My Alpha King.

I had probably been trying to find my way into the forest for hours now. I looked around me to gauge the time, but the sun was shrouded over by the trees.

It was as if everything had come to a complete standstill, and I was stuck in a perpetual purgatory.

The frustration that had been swelling in the pit of my stomach boiled right up to my throat, and from there forced its way out in the form of a blood-curdling scream.

My body shook from exertion as I fought against the vines with what little energy I had left. But before I knew what was happening, they gave way and I stumbled forward.

The thorns ripped at my clothes as I plummeted through, though I quickly found solace on the pile of leaves covering the forest floor, cushioning my fall.

Disoriented, I climbed back to my feet while looking about in confusion. I whirled around when I realized there were no

vines behind me. It was as if they'd never even been there to begin with!

The pathway was suddenly just as it had always been ... clear.

I must get to him, I willed myself forward, but an unfathomable weakness settled into every fiber within me.

A single attempt at walking sent me tumbling into the base of a tree. I grabbed it for stability.

“Kaine!” I cried out, but my voice was unable to reach above anything more than a pathetic whisper.

Just thinking about how long it had taken me to get only as far as this point, was enough to send me into a spiral of despair and misery.

The battle must be over by now...

I tried not to think too hard about how things had turned out; who had been the victor.

Kaine was strong, fearless, and a capable fighter. He was a true king through and through, but that didn't exactly guarantee him an advantage over the likes of the Dark Fae.

I'd seen what the Fae King alone was capable of firsthand. His power was terrifying and unimaginably immense—seemingly limitless—and Kaine had gone up against that monster by himself. And things hadn't looked good before I...

No, he had to be alive!

I couldn't be sure how I knew it, but the beating of his heart still stirred within my chest. Even a pain and exhaustion that didn't feel entirely my own weighed me down. Then there was also a sort of anticipatory itch I was able to pick up on, as if I was waiting for something.

It was all bleeding through the strange connection I had come to realize we shared for some unknown reason.

What could possibly be going on out there?

The sounds of shouting men and galloping horses tore through the otherwise serene surroundings.

Fear was the first emotion that jolted through me. After that, thinking it might be Kaine riding with his men through the forest in search of me, a spark of hope flinted into my heart.

The beginnings of a smile stretched the corners of my mouth, but it froze the moment the retinue of men riding on the horses came into view.

The blue and yellow sigil decorating the front of the riders' armor alerted me to the fact that it wasn't Kaine or his men...

The thunder of galloping hooves rumbled through the ground and my chest.

That sigil signified the Larose Kingdom.

That sigil could only mean one thing: Prince Nikolai Magus was nearby.

The small light somewhere inside of me flickered out, replaced by a sickening cold dreading its way right down to my fingertips as they charged at me.

Frozen in place, all I could do was watch as a dozen horses surrounded me and try to comprehend what the men atop them were going on about. They were shouting things in a different language.

I couldn't help but wonder if it was purposeful. They didn't want me to know what they were saying.

Their exclusion only made me feel more threatened than before.

What should I do? There's no Lexi or Kaine to save me now.

Then everything went still.

I lost my ability to breathe as one part of the barrier of horses opened, revealing the Prince. On his own mount, he calmly passed through and approached me.

His gaze took me in from head to toe with a glimmer of concern, but under that thin veneer, his sense of delight was unmistakable.

“My lady. We meet again.” He bowed his head slightly, without breaking eye contact. It was as if he was afraid if he blinked I would disappear.

This only made me feel more unsettled. The way he was looking at me ... like a cat that got the cream.

A terrible smile carved its way across his mouth as his blue eyes searched mine, looking for something I wasn't willing to give him.

“I'm in a bit of a rush today. I'm not able to stay any longer. Please, forgive me.” I bowed my head until my chin touched my chest, if only to be relieved from the disturbing sight of him for a second.

All I could do was hope that he believed me and let me go. I needed to get back to that swamp. I couldn't let more time go to waste.

“Where are you off to so quickly? You're always running away, little bunny. Your prince wishes to speak with you.” He tilted his head as if irritation was setting in. “Most women would be delighted at that fact.”

I could see his motive as clear as day. He was hunting. That was what he did in this forest, but today, he wasn't after the animals here. He was hunting me.

A shiver ran down the length of my spine as I took a step away from him.

Not that it mattered. I was surrounded on every side by his men. There was no way out.

“I insist you let me go, Your Majesty. I have a very urgent matter to attend to.”

“No matter is more important than the wishes of your future ruler. Accompany me to my castle. I assure you, it will be worth your while,” he said, his excitement so disgustingly evident, that he might as well have been frothing at the mouth.

“No. I will not be going anywhere with you.” I stood my ground even though I was horribly outnumbered.

I fought back against the desperate tears that threatened to escape my eyes. *I must get to Kaine...*

“Your prince has offered you an invitation, and you will be a polite little peasant and accept it.” He gritted his teeth as he tried to cling to that last bit of composure he had.

I crossed my arms to let him know that I wasn’t going to back down.

“Fine, we’ll do this the hard way,” he grumbled under his voice, slapping the reins against the horse’s thick neck and guiding it over to me.

Not knowing what else to do, I started mentally compiling everything I knew about horses from the years I spent taking care of our family farm that could help me in this situation. There was only one thing that stood out from the rest: even the most docile of horses got spooked by snakes.

But where am I supposed to get a snake now?

Then I remembered the black ribbon Tieni had tied into my hair before the battle. I wasn’t sure if it was even still there after clawing my way through thorny vines for hours, but as I reached behind my head, I was relieved to feel the layered silk material there.

It was hanging on by only a tight knot as the bow had long since come undone. I pulled the ribbon from my hair and began to fervently wave it at the horses. Immediately, their eyes turned white and fearful, and they threw their heads about in the air as they backed away, allowing me a small space to dash through.

I took the opening and darted off toward the densely packed trees ahead.

Shouts of anger echoed from behind me, causing prickles of terror to skitter down the nape of my neck.

I barely ran ten yards before something gripped a bundle of my hair and yanked me back full force. My face smacked into what I could only assume was a horse’s saddle, and my vision and thoughts turned blurred and slow.

No...

I have to get back out there...

Kaine...

The maw of darkness closed over me and swallowed.



I dreamt that I was sinking. Not into an ocean, but an unending expanse of viscid muddiness.

My body felt like a rock as I was being sucked into its depths. I couldn't move at all.

It already took every ounce of strength and willpower I had to so much as force open my heavy eyelids.

The throbbing inside my skull was overwhelming, and any attempt at movement only exacerbated the pangs of it. But at least I was able to discern I wasn't being devoured by mud after all. I was sinking into a soft feathery mattress instead.

Despite the pain, I turned my head and looked around the room.

The space was lit only by candles, making it harder to see all the details. But I could tell the room was very large, even as the guttering little flames' light didn't reach far.

On the other side of the room, beams of sunlight languidly leaked through the closed shutters of the tall window. I lifted my arm and reached for the edge of the bed, using it to pull and sit myself up.

My body screamed at me, begging me to stay still and sleep, but the mere thought of it churned my stomach. How could I sleep when I didn't know where I was?

What happened?

I rubbed my fingertips against my forehead, as if that was supposed to jog my memory.

A blurred and disjointed impression of a man came to mind. I couldn't get a clear image of him, only a clear emotion.

Anxiety crept into my throat, closing off my airways the moment I remembered what had happened in the forest with the Prince.

Does that mean I'm in his castle?

But why would he bring me here?

I didn't have any answers, but I knew I had to escape. I pulled myself out of bed with the strength the adrenaline coursing through my veins lent me.

I stumbled and limped my way over to the window, and the first thing I tried to do was open the shutters to get a bearing on where I was, but they were stuck in that position.

"Damn!" I griped to myself, but reached for a candle so that I could explore the room inside instead.

It appeared to be a plain and insignificant area, save for the luscious bed. And taking its size into consideration as well, it was likely a spare room that rarely got used if the layers of dust were anything to go by.

Not that I was anything close to an expert on castles, but this room sure seemed odd to me. If nothing else, the Prince was an ostentatious man, and wouldn't condone a space like this inside his castle.

Could it be that the room was actually created as a prison cell?

I couldn't believe it! I had just gotten out of one prison, only to find myself trapped within another...

Then again, the Alpha King's castle didn't feel like a prison toward the end.

A glint of warmth flickered through my chest as I remembered my time with him.

Kaine, how am I supposed to get back to you now?

I shook my head and set my mind to continuing my search. Reminiscing wasn't going to get me any less trapped.

My hand slid along the wall until I found a door. Excitement rushed through me as my shaking hand gripped the cold metal door knob.

It turned without a hitch.

It isn't locked?

The door opened with a creak loud enough to make me cringe. It seemed to echo right through the stone, and the entire castle for that matter.

I broke out in an instant cold sweat, anxiety running down my skin like thousands of little spiders.

I peeked my head out only to see two guards standing on either side of my door. I gasped and had the urge to run back into the room, but knew there was no use in doing that. They'd already seen me.

“Good, you're awake,” the burlier of the two guards growled at me with a slight slur to his speech, as if he was drunk. “Prince Nikolai would like to have a word with you.”

I couldn't move, not even as the guard kept leering at me like I was nothing more than a nuisance in his eyes ... like I was livestock that had yet to be slaughtered. It was as if I wasn't human at all!

The look in his brown eyes was so surreal that I found myself entranced by it. By the time I snapped out of it, I realized the other guard had left, and was already returning with the Prince in tow.

“Ah, I'm so glad to see you finally decided to join us!” He sounded joyous—almost warm—but I knew the truth.

I had sensed it from the very first moment we'd met. He was a monster.

I instinctively backed away from him, going deeper into the room again, but he simply followed suit as if it was some amusing game we were playing.

“What do you want from me?”

“Want? From *you*?” He threw his head back and laughed.

My eyes flashed around the room, unsure of what he found so funny.

“The poor peasant girl is asking the rich and powerful Prince what he wants from her, as if she had something of value to barter,” he crowed, his blond hair falling over his forehead as he leaned over and grabbed his stomach from how much this idea amused him.

This man is crazy!

I pressed my lips together in disdain as I waited for him to finish.

“It’s quite simple, really. I wanted you, so I took you—like plucking a flower from the garden.” He sauntered over to me, sweeping my red hair off of my shoulder.

Even a simple touch like that from him disgusted me to my very core. My entire body revolted against the sensation, but I knew that every move I made now was going to dictate what was going to happen to me next.

“What could I possibly offer you, Your Majesty? I’m just a nobody,” I ground out, attempting to sound meek, but the flames of rage burrowed holes through my act.

“I haven’t figured that out yet. You intrigued me that first day I saw you in the forest. Then I couldn’t get you out of my head when I saw you with the fabled Alpha King.” A violent sneer came across his face at the mention of Kaine.

How does he know about him and what he is?

“I’m afraid you’ll only be disappointed, Sire. I’m no one special—just a plain young woman.” I held his gaze in an attempt to gauge what he was thinking.

It was nothing good.

He breathed out a laugh through his nostrils and shook his head. “Now, you take me for a fool. You are anything but

plain, girl, and until I decide what I want with you, you will stay here and accompany me.”

My facade crumbled right before his eyes as the blood in my veins turned to ice.

Stay?

“Sire, please. I really do have something important to attend to.” I never took myself as someone who begged, but the desperation I felt got the better of me.

He raised his hand swiftly, and in the instant that followed, my ears were ringing and I was disoriented. I fought with my balance to not lose my footing. The throbbing pain in my head was back with a vengeance as well.

My hand slowly cupped the side of my face where the Prince had just struck me.

“You will do well to remember that you are here at my behest. If I should decide that you no longer please me, then I kill you with my bare hands. No one would bat an eye. I could parade your corpse through the streets, and the crowds would still cheer my name.” He leaned in close, pointing a remorseless finger at me. “Do you understand?”

My lips trembled as they parted to respond promptly for fear he would strike again. “Loud and clear.”

“Good.” He stood up straight and leered down his nose at me. “You’ve bored me. I’ll be taking my leave now.”

He was gone in a matter of seconds.

As soon as the door closed, I collapsed and started beating my fists against the floor, as if it was responsible for the predicament I was in.

This imprisonment thing is getting really damn old!

K A I N E

Splinters bit into my knuckles the moment my fist slammed into the tree's bark. "Dammit! Where is she?"

"Sire," Garmilen said, approaching me with trepidation plaguing him as he pulled at his fingers. "Don't you think it's more vital to focus our efforts on regaining control of the kingdom?"

He was right. That was supposed to be of the utmost importance to me, but the longer I thought about how she had disappeared off the face of the earth, the more violent and unclear my mind became.

Currently, that was a very dangerous thing for me. If I lost my temper for even a moment, the Fae King would take control over me. Then I would be useless to the forest as well as Sophia.

I'd been responsible for her safety. The one thing I had tasked myself with, and I failed... Again.

"Don't let the darkness take you," Garmilen said calmly as he placed a careful hand on my back.

"I won't. I will right these wrongs. The Dark Fae cannot be allowed to rule our kingdom." I looked at him, feeling the exhaustion beginning to get the better of me. "The fate of the world depends on us."

Garmilen nodded, attempting to hide the fear that turned his face pale and caused beads of sweat to form on his brow.

I settled into a nest of roots and leaves beside a large tree. We were just outside the border of my kingdom. If I got too close to the land now, no amount of staying focused and calm would save me.

It was partly hidden by the branches and overgrowth of the trees, but my eyes managed to find the sliver of the crescent moon hanging in the sky.

“Divine Goddess, Helene. Hear me now. Protect my Sophia. Keep her safe until I get there,” I prayed as my blinking slowed, and my eyes started to fall shut. “Goddess help the man or beast that lays a finger on her...”

Sleep took me before I knew it. My mind was black for a long while, but a faint light appeared and grew brighter off in the distance.

I trudged toward it. Every step felt like my feet were treading through a quagmire.

Damn, am I so drained that even my ability to dream is being affected?

As I slowly approached the light, it formed an image of a pink room with a four-poster bed. To the right was a floor-to-ceiling window that was covered up by faded blue shutters.

The room was dark, but I was a shifter. I could see the room clearly. And as if by themselves, my eyes darted to the fiery red-haired woman sleeping in the middle of the bed.

She slept restlessly, tossing and turning as I stepped out of the darkness of my mind and into her room.

“Sophia,” I called out to her softly, but my voice carried on the air around me instead of out of my mouth.

I worried that the faint sound wouldn’t be enough to beckon her mind to mine, but as if she’d been waiting for me, she suddenly sat up straight. Her chest rose and fell with panic as she looked around the room.

Her attention gravitated in my direction, but because she was fully awake, she couldn’t see me.

Disappointment struck right through my chest like a rusted spear. I was nothing but a ghost to her right now.

“Sophia... I’m right here with you.”

I reached out to her, even though I knew it served no purpose—knowing that she would not feel me—but I could pretend for a moment.

My hand fell through her face as she visibly shivered and looked around in a panic.

“Kaine?” Her voice cracked as she called out to me blindly. “I can hear you, but I can’t see you.”

Her eyes filled with tears as she looked down.

My heart wrenched with helplessness.

“Wait for me. I will find you.” My strength began to fade as the image of her started to dissipate.

“Kaine? Kaine, don’t leave me!” Her sweet voice cried out to me, just before I woke up.

I looked around erratically, but soon realized I was alone in the forest exactly where I had fallen asleep earlier.

She’s gone again... The thought was too much to bear. I pressed my fists into my eye sockets, rubbing them roughly in frustration.

I knew she was alive at least, but she was also in danger—that much had been clear from the fear and uncertainty in her eyes. I hadn’t recognized the room she was in, so I didn’t even know where she was.

Sophia, I’m going to undo the damage I’ve done, I promised up at the starry night sky. I’ll get you back home again.

A part of me was happy she wasn’t here to see the forest in the state it was in. As soon as the Fae King had taken over my kingdom, rot and decay began ravaging the land.

My one duty to this land had been to protect my castle, for the one who controlled it, controlled the land and the very spirit of the forest and the magic that resides within it.

While the magic was potent, it was neither good nor evil.

And the Dark Fae had control of my castle now, meaning the Forest of Sorrows was at their nonexistent mercy.

If Sophia could see it now, she would weep at my failures.

I dug my hand into the dried roots of the tree that had been full of life right before I'd fallen asleep. Instead of strong roots, I pulled out a handful of dust.

Soon, there would be nothing left to save...

I wished Tieni was here. I could have used her usual words of encouragement right about now.

But those bastards had her trapped in my castle, and were forcing her to serve them.

Time was of the essence.

Sophia. The forest. Tieni.

Choose to save one and risk losing the other two forever.

What should I do?

SOPHIA

I jolted up out of bed, looking around the room frantically. I could have sworn that I'd heard Kaine calling out my name again.

His voice had sounded so close this time that it might as well have been coming from right beside me, but alas, there was still no one there.

It was only me here, alone in the darkness.

I hugged my knees to my chest and tried to ease the angst eating away at me. I looked up at the shuttered window and wondered if perhaps he was calling me from there.

It was quite a stretch, but at this point, I was desperate.

I pulled a pin from my hair, releasing one of my curls, and grabbed the candle sitting on the nightstand. I brought it over to the window with me.

I held the light close to the lock and determined my hairpin would be enough to work against it. I wasn't sure when I had become an expert on breaking out of places... I supposed that it had all started because of Kaine and my time as a prisoner inside his castle.

The cool night breeze blew in through the shutters, alerting me to the fact that the window was open on the other side.

A glimpse of hope trilled through my blood.

I concentrated heavily on the lock as I played around with the pin inside of it until I heard a click, and the lock fell loose into my waiting hand.

It took everything within my power to not cheer with excitement. I had to keep quiet so I didn't alert the guards standing just outside the door.

I slowly pulled the lock away and opened the shutters, only to find that the window wasn't open after all.

There was simply a hole as if a rock had gone through it.

The disappointment began to settle into my chest as I realized there was no one on the other side of my window.

Perhaps I was simply hearing things...

I continuously had dreams where I thought Kaine was calling out to me, but I always woke up to an empty room. I brushed the disappointment aside so that I could focus on my escape.

No matter. At least I got it open!

My fingers curled under the window frame, and it took all the strength in my little body to lift it.

Afterward, huffing and puffing, I leaned onto the window sill as I poked my head outside. But the moment I looked down, vertigo took over any other feeling that might have been coursing through me.

The room was either so high up that it was above the clouds, or there was a heavy fog covering the land tonight. Whichever the case, I couldn't discern the actual distance I needed to climb—or possibly jump—down.

I'd done my best this past month to not feel helpless, but the more days that passed, the more I felt separated from Kaine.

I couldn't help recalling the way Prince Nikolai had been treating me during this time. I had bruises all over my arms and back from when I'd disobeyed or displeased him.

He was horribly possessive of me. Even as he paraded me around his kingdom, at court, and at various functions, he would become violent if another man showed the slightest interest in me.

I couldn't believe a man like this was allowed to become a king and rule over the lives of others. The instant the current King passed away, the Larose Kingdom would be in greater peril than anyone realized.

My thoughts were distracted as I noticed something bright and golden moving within the heavy fog. I squinted and leaned even more over the windowsill to get a better view.

A deer's head lifted out of the fog and looked right up at me.

I gasped but quickly covered my mouth with my palm, hoping that I hadn't made too much noise.

What's it doing here of all places?

It was the same deer I'd rescued from Prince Nikolai a few months back!

"Do you have a death wish?" I whispered quietly under my breath.

Despite my shock, I was happy to see that she was still alive.

Looks like it wasn't a waste of medicine after all.

I raised my hand, waving gently as it continued to watch me with a certain intelligence in its gaze. It even appeared to bow its head to me in respect right before running off at the sound of guards patrolling the grounds of the castle below.

Their torches flickered through the fog, but the golden deer was gone long before they got close enough to spot it.

Seeing the deer almost felt like a beacon of hope for me. It was as if she had come to tell me that I was going to get through this.

A smile pulled at the corners of my mouth. It felt tight and foreign on my face after not having smiled for several weeks on end.

So much had happened to me since I'd met that deer...

I had been the Alpha King's prisoner, and then his lover. I had met some wonderful shifters and Light Fae as well. I had

also been scared half to death more times than I wished to count.

Not to mention, I'd been cursed, too.

The thought rang out inside of me like the endless knell of an alarm bell.

I'd been *cursed*...

By all rights, I should have been dead by now. But instead, I felt nothing.

I pressed my hand to my chest, and my heart responded with a steady beat.

Could it be that the curse was weaker the farther away from the forest I was?

I could still recall the horrific feeling of my heart being crushed and ripped out of my chest by a phantom hand.

Or could it be that I simply wasn't a concern for the Fae King anymore? Now that I was out of the picture, there was likely no use in expelling any more magic or energy on me.

What about Kaine?

Would they just let him go after they got what they wanted from him as well?



*T*he morning came all too soon, and I found myself at another dreary court function with the Prince.

At this point, word had already gotten around that I was a royal consort of his.

This little rumor had caused snickering and bullying from the people of the court.

I was a juicy, low-hanging fruit in their otherwise boring lives.

Heavens, I would be miserable, too, if my entire life merely consisted of having to spend all my time around conceited

people and attend boring functions.

“Of course, our main focus needs to be the Forest of Sorrows.”

The words the Prince spoke ran right into my ears and yanked all of my attention to his conversation.

Why would he bring up the Forest of Sorrows? That place had nothing to do with humans.

Everyone stood from their seats in unison, signaling that the court session had ended.

Damn, I missed the conversation!

I realized too late they'd been going over a battle strategy. But surely, they weren't dumb enough to start a war with a bunch of magical beings, were they?

Even still, my heart trembled inside my chest. I could only imagine the devastation and suffering that would ensue, on both sides.

I recalled what Kaine had told me about how the forest had been designed to deter humans. But that didn't mean that they wouldn't be able to enter. I had been able to after all.

I can't let them attack the forest, I decided.

I had to devise the best way to go about finding out exactly what the Prince's motive and plan was, and stop him. I knew he wasn't going to give me this information freely, but perhaps I could look into documented accounts concerning the relations between the Larose Kingdom and the Forest of Sorrows archived somewhere...

The question was: how was I going to accomplish this when I was either with Prince Nikolai or locked in my room?

As I rose from my chair, I pondered various plausible possibilities, but it felt like all of them would make me seem too suspicious or like I was outright plotting something.

The best way to do this is to inch closer to freedom so slowly that he doesn't notice. In order to do that, I need to stroke his ego a little.

I swallowed the bile that shot into my throat before approaching Nikolai's side. "Sire."

He leered at me from over his shoulder. "Yes, my pet?"

My stomach churned at the insinuation, but I pressed on.

I reached for him, placing my hands on his forearm and pulling him close to my chest. "I've been wanting to ask you for a favor, but I'm afraid it would displease you."

"Then why bother asking me at all?" he said, his voice filled with disdain as he rolled his eyes up to the ceiling.

My chest shuddered as phantom pains spread to every bruise he had put on my skin, old and new.

Stay focused. You have to do this for Kaine. For yourself.

"Because I think I could be more useful to you if you'd let me." I ducked my head, playing the meek young peasant girl that he imagined I needed to be.

Perhaps I had been that girl once, but she was long gone now.

"I'm intrigued." He turned to me fully, crossing his arms and shaking my hands away from him. "Go on."

"Well, I have been taught to read. So if it pleases Your Majesty, I would like to begin reading books that might instruct me on how to converse in a way that you might prefer." I tried to scramble together an explanation.

"Why the sudden interest in pleasing me?" Rightfully so, he was skeptical, but I could see the hint of his fascination at the sudden change in me by the way he arched the corner of his brow.

"We have spent a lot of time together, have we not?" I asked, allowing my eyes to dance away from him as if I was nervous. "Yet I feel I've hardly gotten the opportunity to get to know you."

It was difficult to act lovesick with someone I detested as much as I did him, but I had to ignore my instincts right now.

He rubbed his chin pensively, looking me up and down. Without warning, he began laughing at me.

I tilted my head in confusion. “Have I said something comical, Your Majesty?”

“But of course! You think me a fool?” He shook his head as his laughter died down. “Everyone knows that women aren’t capable of comprehending what they read.”

I had to bite my tongue and remind myself of my goal. “It’s true that I’m not nearly as intelligent as you, but I only wish to offer you better company.”

“Fret not about that. I do not often read, and therefore, do not require such intellectual conversation from you.” He patted me on the head condescendingly, dashing my hopes with each demeaning touch. Then he stopped and said, “But I wonder if it’ll make you more pleasant if you had something to keep your mind occupied.”

Pleasant? You kidnapped me!

If I had Kaine’s strength, I would rip his head off right now. Instead, I pressed a wry smile against my teeth and nodded. “If it makes my company more enjoyable, I would be happy to give it a go.”

There was a long pause in which I failed to take a single breath.

I couldn’t be sure if I was going to get a few lashings tonight for simply asking for something so small, but he didn’t seem to be turning to anger.

“Fine. There is a marvelous library in the east wing close to your room. We can see how much you improve then. If not, then there will be consequences for wasting my precious time.” He looked me up and down once more before turning his back to me.

His heavy red cloak flared and blew against the side of my dress as he walked away from me. It was only after he was a few feet away that I felt safe enough to breathe normally.

There was no guarantee that this was going to better my situation in any way, but it was a start. In fact, it was the only progress I had made in a month, and I was damn well going to celebrate it.

My two usual guards walked me to the library in silence. It was only a few hallways down from where my room was.

I also took this time to memorize my surroundings. This was the most I had been allowed to move around the castle—even though only a few doors stood between my room and the library.

Whenever the opportunity to escape came, I needed to know what the best and fastest routes to the outside were.

Most of the other doors the guards took me past didn't appear to be anything of note though. If I had to guess, I would say that they marked more prison cells for other unsuspecting people.

“You will be allowed to remain here until dinner time under our supervision. If you so much as make a move that we don't like, we will alert His Majesty, and you will be punished.” The taller brown-eyed guard warned me.

These two men were my only other constant company, and because of their helmets, it was strange to think that I didn't even know what they looked like. I only knew that one had brown eyes and the other had blue.

“Thank you,” I said compliantly, and bowed my head at both of them before turning to inspect the library.

It was grand, to be sure, but it was nothing compared to the one in Kaine's castle.

As I approached one of the shelves, I could see the thick layers of dust caked over all the books. It appeared as if they hadn't been touched in decades!

What a waste of knowledge.

It angered me to think that I had so little to read growing up because books were such a scarcity in my village.

Meanwhile, this place had all these books that no one even bothered to keep clean, much less make use of them.

I continued walking through the thin aisles lit by golden candelabras until I saw something of note. I wasn't sure exactly what I was looking for, but I could feel myself being guided somewhere. Once I saw it, I would know.

My eyes caught a glimpse of a navy blue bound book that was slightly less dusty than the rest of the books around it.

Ah-ha!

I wasted no time in reaching for it. As I pulled it out from between the covers of two other books, cobwebs stretched and came loose along with it. The cloth cover was all but eaten away due to age and neglect.

I inspected the spine and then the front cover to find a title for the book, but it was unmarked.

Curiosity got the best of me and I opened the book. The spine cracked and popped away from the bound pages.

I turned around, only to see the guards looking down the aisle at me to make sure that I wasn't doing anything suspicious. I was stark still until they decided that I wasn't a threat and walked away.

Strange, I thought as I returned my attention to the book in my hand.

It wasn't printed. Instead, it appeared to be a journal. And the name inside on the first page said it belonged to Petre Magus...

That's Nikolai's father!

I eagerly started to flip through it, page after page, finding entries that spanned over decades. I only stopped my fervent scanning when a word caught my eye.

It had been written so carefully and slowly that the ink had bled through to the next page.

The word was 'War.'

I sunk down to the floor and placed the book in my lap as I leaned my back up against the shelves, preparing myself for what I was about to read:

December 27th in the year of our gods 1187:

This war has been brutal. It has claimed far more lives than anything we might have gained from it. I fear now that I've made the wrong decision. I should never have sided with those wretched creatures. I was advised against it, but I was blinded by greed and the need for power. Of course, I see this now only after it's too late. I have lost my army. Those shifting beasts were far too strong and outnumbered us by at least a few hundred. I see now that I was merely a pawn in that hooded creature's game. He betrayed me. Now I must rebuild my kingdom farther away from the forest to prevent the backlash of what I started. As to what is going to happen to the creatures of that forest, I dare not say. All that I know is that I have seen things I cannot unsee. I know things I no longer wish to know. My experience in that forest has shaken all of my beliefs. The one thing I know for certain now is that we will need the help of all the Gods if King Barnabas defeats the shifting creatures."

My eyes scanned over the words again and again, trying to make sense of all the information that was coming in.

This must have been why Nikolai was so familiar with Kaine already. His father had been the one to go to war with the shifters all those years ago. He had also likely been the reason why Kaine hated humans so much.

And this 'hooded creature' called, King Barnabas? Was that the name of the Fae King? And what had Petre feared would happen if the Dark Fae defeated Kaine and his shifters?

"Times up, *Princess*," One of the guards called out to me.

I quickly slammed the book closed and held it behind my back as I stood up. By the time they turned the corner to set eyes on me, I had regained control over my emotions, but my chest still quaked with the plethora of information I had just learned.

“I’m ready,” I mumbled mindlessly as I strode past them, all the while keeping the journal out of their sight.

It took all of my concentration not to run back to my room. The urgency of getting answers was almost unbearable.

I pressed the pages that might hold those answers closer to my chest as I walked down the corridor. I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep a wink until I’d finished scouring every single word inside this journal tonight.

TIENI

*M*y body was numb from all the tasks I'd been laden with throughout the day. I had done my best to keep the castle together, but the Dark Fae's rot was copious and all-consuming.

Without the magic of the Light Fae to repair it, the castle's deterioration had sped up exponentially, too. The roof crumbled like freefalling snow and the stone walls groaned like tired old bones more than ever before.

I'd always thought of Ulric Castle as a living person, and it pained me to see them withering away right before my helpless eyes. I had been silently praying to our Goddess, Helene, to bring Kaine back and restore order to this damned place, but I have not received as much as a whisper in reply.

I feared we had been abandoned.

How could She have forsaken us in this time of need?

If I only had my shifting abilities, things might have been different. I was nowhere near strong enough to fight off the Dark Fae, but as a collective, we still stood a chance.

But at this rate, the forest will be lost forever by the end of the month...

My hands trembled, but I stuffed the emotion deep down into the pit of my stomach. Standing around feeling fearful and anxious about it didn't help anyone. I needed to find a way to actually do something that would make a difference in our current situation.

I walked down the long, empty hallway painted in black sludge. The Dark Fae's filth seemed to be perpetually seeping from the very cracks in the stone walls. The many, many years of effort I'd exerted in keeping this castle together had been all but destroyed in a mere month.

Has it really been that long?

A severe frown edged into my brow the moment I entered the main room. An array of magical creatures from the forest stood shackled together here.

They were weary and listless as a result of the beatings they'd received. The Dark Fae weren't kind hosts.

There were centaurs, unicorns, sprites, a siren, a banshee, and one Light Fae... Or, at least, those were the ones who still appeared to be alive.

I had been tending to them daily as best I could every time those horrible creatures were done using them as entertainment. But for many of them, even my medicine wasn't enough.

My heart stopped and started clawing its way to my throat when I saw a new face standing in line in front of the Fae King.

She was human...

For a brief moment, I feared it was Sophia standing there, but relaxed when I realized this girl had smooth brown hair and fair skin. She did look to be about Sophia's age, though, and had most likely come from the small village bordering the forest as well.

This meant that the Dark Fae's power was spreading. Soon, they would be able to reach even farther beyond the forest.

My dear Sophia... I hope you've found safety.

She was going to need it if Kaine didn't return home soon.

Oh, there are so many things I still have to tell you ... things I want you to know.

“Helene, if you’re still there, please protect her—protect my great-granddaughter.”

SOPHIA

I leaned back against the headboard as I sunk deeper into my mattress, clutching the navy blue journal to my chest.

King Petre had documented everything that'd happened during the war. By his own admission, he had slaughtered thousands of shifters during that time.

How many of them were Kaine's family and friends?

This monstrous king had taken *everything* from Kaine, all for the sake of greed and power he'd never truly even acquired in the end.

As fury welled up inside my belly like bubbling acid, I suddenly understood why Kaine harbored such intense hatred for humans. Just reading these accounts made me want to lash out and rage as if I was some territorial bobcat queen.

I couldn't imagine how it must have been like for him to be there in the thick of it, being forced to watch as the people he loved got cut down.

My whole body shook as tears poured down my cheeks, and ended up soaking the pages of the book still clutched tightly to me.

Kaine's agony was like a living, pulsing thing inside my chest.

A loud creak that normally accompanied my chamber door being open rang through the room, alerting me that someone was entering.

I jumped up out of bed and wiped my face vigorously so as to look as presentable as possible in my nightgown.

“Why are you still in bed? You know that I have an important function today, and that I require you to attend,” Nikolai said with a sneer, eyeing me disapprovingly as he stood in the doorway with his arms crossed.

My body shook instinctively, already anticipating the punishment I was sure to get later on.

His eyes darted over to my bed, where he found the journal I was reading. That made him smile, which was somehow even more off-putting than his anger.

“Oh, I see. You got carried away trying to appease me. I hope your conversation does not disappoint tonight. We are meeting with royalty from neighboring kingdoms today.”

Cold dread lanced through my stomach.

Neighboring kingdoms? He told me yesterday it was just going to be a simple gathering...

A sneaking suspicion that this meeting had to do with Nikolai’s plans for the forest settled over me like a dark cloud.

He left the room, seemingly content for now, and my ladies-in-waiting entered with a huge gold gown immediately after.

It had to be the gaudiest thing I’d ever seen anyone presumptuous enough to wear in my life, but I wasn’t allowed to complain.

I never thought I’d miss the dresses Tieni had always laid out for me. I almost laughed out loud thinking how I used to call those gowns much too flashy and excessive.

What I wouldn’t have given to go back to that castle... Back to a time when I had truly been happy, even if it’d been only for a short while.

I allowed my mind to wander as they dressed me and tied me up tightly into a corset. The top of the dress was incredibly revealing and pushed my breasts up front and center.

I somehow felt more naked in this gown than I would have if I walked out of this room with only my nightdress on. I crossed my arms over my torso as I marched down the hall, listening to my heels clicking against the stone.

“Cheer up, *Princess*. You’ve got it better than most,” the brown-eyed guard drawled mockingly.

Why does he keep calling me Princess like that?

It felt demeaning to say the least, which was likely his exact intention each time he said it.

I was surprised when they walked me down a different hallway than usual. I’d never seen where this one led before.

Having attended many of Nikolai’s stupid meetings, I’d been almost all over the main floor of the castle, as well as numerous other castles, but I had never been taken to this room before.

Music was playing just on the other side of the tall golden doors. The gentle melody produced by the strings and percussions there did little to ease my nerves as the grand doors opened for me.

All at once, my insides twisted into a hundred little knots as everyone in the large ballroom paused their conversations to turn and watch my entrance. Even at first glance, I knew this party was much larger than what I had been led to believe.

Every step I took felt even worse than the last. Something was very wrong here. I just couldn’t hone in on what exactly.

Out of nowhere, my arm was accosted by Nikolai, and I wasn’t quite quick enough to muffle the sharp intake of breath at his sudden appearance.

“What took you so long?” he said with gritted teeth, making it look like a smile to everyone else.

“I’m sorry, Sire. The dress was a hassle,” I whispered, hoping the explanation was enough to get me out of the punishments he might already have been cooking up behind those cruel eyes.

Nikolai walked me down the grand staircase that was lined with gold. As my gaze rose, I saw that the entire room was gilded with so much gold it was practically choking on it.

And there wasn't even as much as a flower in sight. It all just felt entirely devoid of life and anything that might resemble beauty.

"Do you like it?" Nikolai questioned, but I could tell he didn't really care about my answer.

"It's lovely." I blinked my eyes away from him. I didn't know how much longer I could keep up this act with him, much less make it believable.

Just being near him made my skin crawl, but I forced myself to ignore it. I still had information to pry from him after all.

"Dance with me," he demanded, and without waiting for a response he pulled me into him.

He wrapped his arm around me, placing his hand on the small of my back. His other hand gripped mine tightly, and held it up slightly higher than was comfortable.

I hated this. It felt as if I was cheating on Kaine by allowing this disgusting man to touch me. Yet, I had to keep stomaching it.

I cleared my throat, schooling my face away from disgust and into the closest representation of reverence I could muster before looking up into his eyes. "I have been reading an interesting journal from the library. The content is most ... heroic."

It took everything in me not to close my hands around his neck and squeeze with all my strength.

"You must be referring to my father's journal. Indeed, it's the most impressive thing he has ever done in his lifetime," he gloated proudly as he swept me across the floor as if I were a broom. "I will be far greater than that, though. I have plans for that forest that's going to shower my kingdom with unimaginable riches and glory."

“Don’t you think that it might cause harm to those that live in the forest?” I asked as I struggled just to keep up with him. “What if those—creatures that His Majesty the King talked about double cross you as well?”

He looked at me curiously, as if he was confused about me being able to form such an intelligent question.

Perhaps I needed to tone it back a bit. It was important for me to remain the gullible and love-struck idiot he believed me to be.

“No, I’m not worried about this at all, and I’ll tell you why. My army will be much bigger than my father’s ever was. I have four times the number of men, and they will be better trained as well,” he announced proudly.

This man is as dumb as he is mean.

I tilted my head, not entirely faking my interest. “How do you plan to win against them?”

“So many questions. If I didn’t know any better, I would say that you were a little spy.” He leaned in closer to me, forcing me to inhale the scent of vanilla and garlic on his breath.

My body went rigid.

Dammit, what do I do now?

I laughed it off and shook my head. “Of course not. I am loyal to you, Sire.” The disgust at the words danced on the tip of my tongue until all I could taste was my own bitterness. “I’m merely concerned about the threat those horrifying creatures pose to this land and its people.” Unable to stop myself, I went on to say, “And what about the devastation an army would bring to the forest again?”

Some of the most beautiful people I’d ever met were in that forest...

“Which brings us to my next question. What were you doing there that day with the dishonored Alpha King?” A wicked smile spread across his face like he was a cat that had just cornered a mouse.

“I was—”

Say it, Soph. You have to lie. It's alright. It's not a betrayal. You are doing this to survive. Just say it!

“— kidnapped. Taken prisoner by that monster,” I said almost incoherently, forcing the words out of me. “I had only just escaped when you found me.”

“Ah! I see now. That's why you were in such a rush. You were trying to escape from his evil clutches.” He held up his pointer finger to the ceiling in absolution.

My stomach shrunk in on itself, but I wished instead it would turn inside out and swallow me alive.

“Of course,” I nodded slowly. “I was terrified. I'm sure you could tell.”

“Aren't you glad I came along when I did?” he said, sounding even more proud and certain of himself than usual. “He won't be able to get you from here, my pet. You're well-protected. You'll never have to see that beast ever again.”

How could anyone possibly be this obtuse? I supposed I should count myself lucky. If he was smarter, he would have been a lot harder to fool.

“I have some fantastic news for you, Sophia. I figured out what I wanted with you.” He flashed a debonair expression at me, which wasn't anything I'd seen him do before. “I know it's taken me some time, but I had to be sure.”

Did this mean that I had managed to get on his good side?

He ceased dancing and turned to the crowd while raising his hand for their attention. A second later trumpets rang out on either side of the ballroom, and the music instantly cut off right in the middle of the song, and everyone turned toward the Prince expectantly.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please may I have your attention. I have some very important news to announce.” He glanced down at me and winked before turning back to the crowd, soaking in the attention like it was water and he was a man in the desert. “As I'm sure you all know, it is my duty as the

future king of this land to marry and create a strong lineage for my bloodline. I am happy to announce that I have found your future queen.”

My head was spinning as he spoke. Every word out of his mouth made it feel like I was sinking deeper and deeper into a dream.

This couldn't be real. What in the Goddess's name was going on? Surely, no one would go along with this lunacy and allow him to marry a peasant girl!

I looked around the room for help, but no one dared speak out against him. All they did was gasp and whisper among themselves.

No, please. Let this be a nightmare. Wake me up!

I stepped away from him and before I knew it, I was running back up the grand staircase. He was calling out my name behind me, but I didn't react. I just needed to get out of there.

Halfway up the stairs though, I began to feel lightheaded and toppled over to the side. I grabbed the side of the railing for support.

A hand gripped my arm tightly, yanking me back and forcing me to turn around. I nearly fell down the flight of stairs doing so.

“Just what do you think you're doing?” Nikolai asked, his tone quiet but it held the unmistakable edge of lethal fury.

The look in his eyes elicited a terror in me that I could liken to only one other moment in my life... When I'd been confronted by the King of the Dark Fae—King Barnabas.

Wide-eyed and desperate, I searched for some kind of humanity in his face, but there was none to be found. I was looking at a hollow shell, devoid of anything good inside of him.

It was as if only now I could see Nikolai for what he really was. His love for destruction and need for domination would

never be sated. He would hunt and gobble up all that was good in the world until nothing was left but himself.

I finally managed to pull my eyes away from him, but he started dragging me up the remaining half of the staircase, through the grand doors, and out of the ballroom. I found I couldn't breathe as he pulled me along with him down the winding hallways of the castle, his grip around my wrist getting tighter and more forceful with every step.

As soon as we reached my room, he threw me onto the hard floor. My knees and elbows cried out in protest.

“Do you have any idea how much you just embarrassed me? Those people are important allies of mine. Now I'm going to have to go back out there and explain to them that this silly little peasant girl, who I'd given everything to, was acting like a spoiled child!”

“Give? No, you *took* everything from me!” I spewed out, unable to hold back all the venomous acid I had been storing for a month anymore. “I would rather die than marry you.”

He bared his teeth at me as he stepped forward into my room. “You really are a stupid girl, aren't you? I could have given you the world.”

The only peace of mind I had was that he kept the door open to the hallway. Not that it mattered if I ran. I would just be caught again, and he would be even more murderous than he was now.

“I can't even look at you right now.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and breathed in deeply. “I'll come back when I'm ready to deal with you again.”

I'm not giving up, Kaine, I thought as Nikolai slammed the door shut behind him. There was a click as he locked the door. *I will never stop fighting to get back to you...*

Even as I made this promise, hopelessness settled over me like a heavy, bleak blanket.

SOPHIA

I sat down at the empty dinner table, save for Nikolai and myself. I'd chosen the chair the farthest away from him.

He'd been fairly silent and absent for the last week, which I was grateful for, but I couldn't quite ignore the undertone of foreboding that came with it.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, the expensive silk brushing against my old bruises as I did. I realized I couldn't even remember where I had gotten half of them from anymore.

He took his pleasure in hurting me so frequently that it'd all begun to blur together. Or maybe it was because I'd been zoning out for most of it. Even though transporting my thoughts somewhere else didn't make it any less painful, it made bearing it easier.

"You're awfully quiet tonight, Sophia," he said, breaking the silence much to my dismay.

He even made it sound as if he was concerned about me. I liked it better when he was cross with me—at least then he didn't pretend like we were good friends.

I knew that I should respond to him for my own sake, but I couldn't bring myself to give him an ounce of what he wanted. I glanced up, simply watching as his anger boiled over onto his face, but still, my stubbornness won out.

"I'm not sure what your problem is, but you better fix it. There will be consequences if you don't." He stood up quickly, trying to add force to his threat.

“You think I’m scared of you?” I snapped at him, flying out of my chair so quickly it flipped right onto its back as I slammed my hands onto the tabletop. “You’re just a power-hungry prince that’s way in over his head.” I threw him the most meaningful glare I could summon up, hoping my words would get through that thick, prideful skull of his. “You will lead your kingdom into ruin if you continue down this path.”

Though his eyes seemed to drop to the table as if scolded, it only made that wretched smile spreading across his face more hair-raising.

“You know, I figured out what it was. The thing that attracted me to you,” he said excitedly, as if he’d just had the biggest breakthrough or revelation of his life. “I wondered why I was so displeased, even when you were trying so hard to impress me. I thought perhaps I had lost interest in you, but I see the truth of it now. It’s your feistiness, your defiance against me that makes me want you more. The more you hate me, the more I want to keep you...”

The skin all over my body crawled as my stomach churned, and my throat tightened. Every alarm in my body was going off, telling me I needed to run.

But where could I go where he couldn’t follow?

His eyes then flickered over to me with a renewed sense of desire. And a suffocating darkness seemed to be coming off him in waves, choking the air out of the room.

The clothes I was wearing suddenly felt like it wasn’t enough. All the layers of silk and chiffon couldn’t hide me from those lustful eyes anymore.

With each step I backed away, he took one closer to me. I quickly changed tactic, and ran to the other side of the table so as to keep it as a barrier between us.

It only worked for a few seconds, for he threw all the food set on top of it to the floor and leaped over. I screamed as he grabbed me and pushed me back onto the table.

No! This can’t be happening! Please, somebody...

I could feel him ripping into the material of my dress, lifting the hem of it as his hand dragged along the length of my leg up to my thigh.

KAINE!

“Be my obedient little plaything, and I might consider not being too rough with you,” he chuckled into my ear as he held me pinned down to the table. “What a shame women break so easily.”

He tried to pull the front of my dress down, but my corset was too tight. He reached for a knife lying on the left side of the table, most likely planning to cut the laces at the back of my corset with it.

This gave me just enough time to react. I looked around and grabbed the first thing within reach on the other side of the table. It was an empty silver platter. It had a good enough weight to it, too.

I used all the strength and anger in my body to swing myself around, using that momentum to send the platter full force at Nikolai’s head.

Everything happened in a blur. One moment, the intense impact of it reverberated through the very bones in my hands and arms, and next, there was the sound of his body hitting the floor more than two yards away from me.

Part of me wondered how on earth I managed to throw him across the room like that with just one hit, while the other part was just happy to be free of him.

Even as I raced down the empty hallway, praying I didn’t bump into any guards up ahead, I could still feel the Prince’s repulsive hand riding up my leg like a ghost haunting that part of my skin. And even as my heart was pounding like a hammer hitting an anvil within my ears, a distant scream from behind me somewhere still reached me.

The instant I made it back to my room, I slammed the door shut before taking a chair and jamming it against the door knob. I knew it wasn’t going to keep him out forever, but it would buy me enough time to figure out my next move.

I removed the lock on my window and opened the shutters again, looking down at the long fall. I had backed myself into a corner.

In my panic, I hadn't considered going downstairs instead. At least there I would have had an exit even if I'd been confronted by guards.

Here in this tower, I'm a sitting duck!

I gasped, nearly toppling over and out of the window when the sudden pounding started at my door.

"You bitch! Open this door, *now!* I swear to the Gods, you will be the sorriest chunk of flesh once I get to you!" Nikolai shouted at me through the door.

The chair holding the door at bay was already budging forward from the amount of force Nikolai was putting behind his attacks. I had even less time than I thought.

With every inch the chair gave, the more reality began to finally sink in.

I wasn't going to cleverly escape him, and I was never going to be free of this place. Kaine was never going to find me in this Goddess-forsaken land either. This was the end of the road for me.

As the chair flew forward and my door flung open, I accepted my fate. At least I would die knowing he hadn't gotten the chance to break me.

My throat tightened and burned, tears welling up in my eyes as I watched him enter the room in a bloodthirsty fury.

My fingers tightened into fists at my sides. I might not be able to overpower him, but I was sure as hell going to take chunks where I could.

"I'm going to *enjoy* squeezing your neck until the light leaves your eyes," he snarled at me like an animal as he wiped at the blood pouring into his eye from his forehead.

Half of his face was covered in crimson, and it took me a moment to realize that I was the one responsible for it.

He charged at me and grabbed my shoulders, digging his fingers in so deep it was as if he wanted to break them with his bare hands.

With no strategy or specific intention in mind—other than getting him away from me—I clutched his arms and pushed him to the side with all the strength I could come up with. Strength that should have been impossible to me...

I watched in shock and awe as Nikolai went flying into the long vanity mirror. The glass shattered onto the floor around him, and it took him some time to get back up to his feet.

I stared at my hands as if they were going to be changed in some way, but they still appeared to be the same ones I'd always had. I wasn't sure where the strength was coming from, but I was grateful to have it in this situation nonetheless.

He lunged at me again, and this time, I wasn't able to shake him. He wrapped his large, rough hands around my neck, and tightened his grip until it was impossible for me to draw air into my lungs.

I clawed at his hands, desperately fighting against him to no avail. I was already starting to lose energy, my protests turning weaker and weaker.

No, this can't be it! Kaine... I still wanted to see him, if only one more time.

Something sharp scraped at the solid stone behind me outside the window, but a low, visceral growl came from right above me.

The Prince's hold on me loosened by a fraction as he slowly looked up to the top of my head with fearful eyes. On instinct, I also followed where his gaze was fixed and found a large outline of a creature perched in the open window there.

But I was fading in and out of consciousness so much that I couldn't fully make out what was going on.

“Sophia!” a familiar voice growled, and it was as if a thunderbolt had just struck me, shocking my system back to life.

Even as the weight of Nikolai's body suddenly disappeared from on top of me, and there were no more hands constricting my throat, I still found it hard to move or breathe.

All I could do was turn to my side and cough violently into the ground, until I was able to let in a painful and strangled breath. I looked around the room for my attacker, but found an eight-foot-tall black-haired beast instead. His back was to me, but I knew immediately who it was.

Hot tears poured out of my eyes, and a relieved smile ran across my face.

It's him. He found me ... and he's okay.

"Kaine?" I called out, but my voice was so strangled that I didn't think he heard me.

But his ear twitched as his head turned, revealing the profile of his long snout and sharp teeth bared in fury as he held Nikolai away from me.

A low growl emitted from his chest as he tried to calm himself, but when he looked back at the Prince, there was no mercy.

Kaine threw him to the ground and began ripping into his body, tearing at his face and chest.

Nikolai cried out in pain and desperation, alerting the guards.

I struggled to get to my feet, knowing that we had to leave immediately if we had any hope of escaping. There were far too many guards stationed in and around the palace for even the Beast to take on.

"Kaine! We have to leave, *now*," I pleaded, but he barely slowed down. So, instead, I approached him carefully, placing my hand on his furry shoulder. "Kaine... Please, stop this. Let's go home."

He paused suddenly and turned to me with a little whimper of concern, lowering himself so that I could climb onto his back. I carefully grabbed his fur and jumped up.

I glanced back at the bloodied body on the floor as we approached the open window. The Prince wasn't dead. His chest heaved with life still as he lifted his head, staring right at Kaine with a hideous grin.

“Mark my words, I'll hunt you down until I have your head on a pike, Beast. I'll parade it around as a trophy while I take your little plaything here and make her suffer for the rest of her days,” he spat out, spraying blood and even a tooth across the gray stone floor.

Kaine's muscles went rigid, and his fur stood on end. His large paw pivoted as he aimed his enraged lupine eyes at Nikolai. His claws scraped against the stone, making a horrible noise that set my teeth on edge.

I urged Kaine not to react to him, but it was as if he'd forgotten I was even there. No matter how I tugged at his fur or cried out for him to leave, he continued stalking closer to Nikolai.

That was until the bustling of metals and the crackling of fires echoed from down the hall.

Panic coursed through my veins, revitalizing my efforts to get through to Kaine.

“Kaine! If you don't go, his men will kill both of us!” I screamed, feeling the reverberation of every word rip from my throat.

Kaine stopped dead in his tracks as one of his large pointed ears twitched. He turned his head slightly as if deciding whether to give in to his instincts or not. Then he shook his head violently, and turned around so fast it made my head spin.

Two heavy bounds of his paws sounded out against the floor before my face was assaulted by the cool and misty night air, and my eyes met a veil of dark blue.

Above us hung a full moon, bathing the earth in its soft glowing light. It felt ethereal and protective somehow. The Goddess...

It all felt so surreal, almost dreamlike.

“Kaine,” I breathed, my lips trembling and my eyes overrun with tears.

I leaned forward, pressing my face into his warm fur as my fingers ran along his neck, curving around it so that I could hug him.

There were so many questions burning in my mind. I wanted to ask him if he’d been able to defeat the Dark Fae.

Had he broken free of his curse?

Was Tieni, Garmilen, and everyone else okay?

I wanted to ask him all of it, but couldn’t. I feared the answers, and like a coward rather wanted to be here with him—feeling his fur and the wind whipping against my face as we passed through the trees of the forest.

For now, I wanted to pretend that everything was right with the world.

“I thought I would never see you again.” My voice was soft, but his sharp ears twitched slightly, letting me know that he heard me.

He then stopped so suddenly that I was thrown from his back. I tumbled over his head and rolled in dried leaves until I hit a tree.

I let out a weeping gasp of pain as I reached behind my head to make sure that I wasn’t bleeding. “What the hell?”

I looked around the dark clearing he stopped in, but didn’t recognize where we were. I figured we would be on our way home, back to his castle.

Why would he...?

My eyes slowly fell to the shadowy creature seething before me. Fear panged down my spine and struck my chest. But what was more painful was the twinge of betrayal accompanying it.

I let out a shaky breath, though I found I couldn’t draw it back in after that.

Kaine's beastly yellow eyes glared at me from across the clearing. They were glowing like two lanterns burning brightly in the dark as he stalked closer and closer.

I had forgotten how massive he was in his shifted form. Every fiber of my being was on high alert. My first instinct was to run screaming, but there was a part of me that wanted to believe that he would never hurt me.

A low growl rumbled through his chest as he watched me with predatory voracity.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, and I could barely swallow for fear it would be too much motion and set him off.

Is he not himself?

Did it mean that he hadn't freed himself from his curse after all?

Or was the full moon too powerful, affecting his ability to control the Beast?

Strange. After spending so much time with him, I still didn't know much about his true nature.

I only knew that he was kind and protective when it counted, even when he was in this form.

What should I do?

Running wasn't an option. Even the tree behind me blocked me from retreating further.

All I could do was watch and accept my fate as the Beast closed in on his prey.

K A I N E

*S*he's here.

She's safe.

I could hardly believe it!

I had her back at last.

As I inched closer to her, she scooted away from me, backing up into the ancient tree trunk behind her. But the look of horror in her eyes was what confused me the most.

Why is she scared of me?

I had just rescued her from that horrendous human after a whole month of searching, had I not? And, surely, she had to know by now that I could never hurt her...

"Sophia." Though I could not speak, I knew she could hear me in the back of her mind.

There was a part of me that would always be with her, no matter how far we were apart.

I held my face to hers, pressing my forehead to her cheek.

For a long while it was as if she couldn't move, but I patiently waited for her to realize that I was still me. When she finally did, Sophia slowly reached up to tangle her fingers into the soft fur around my face, pulling me tighter into her.

I shut my eyes and drew in a deep breath, allowing myself to shift back to my human form.

My fur burned off of my body, and my bones snapped against each other. My teeth gnashed as the pain of the shift shuddered through my every blood vessel. But fortunately, it didn't last for long.

Finally, I collapsed back into my human form, and I was able to take a deep breath as my body relaxed, though my mind was far from it.

I was drowning with thoughts of how close I'd been to losing Sophia forever.

What if it had taken me another second longer to get to her?

What would have happened if she hadn't stopped me from murdering the Prince?

If his guards hadn't captured or taken me out then and there, King Petre would certainly have hunted me down to the ends of the earth, after burning down the entire forest of course.

I knew how ruthless the man could be after all. And just because he had aged, didn't mean he'd gone soft.

Even just thinking about the possibility of losing my home and Sophia, all with one foolish move, was too much for me to bear.

Sophia...

I didn't know what I would have done if she'd died. There would have been nothing to stop me from wreaking havoc on the whole Larose Kingdom.

Images of her pale skin turning gray, mottling right before my eyes, filled my head. I could almost feel my own heart stop beating at the mere idea of it.

My nails dug into the dirt as I fought against the dread, sorrow, and rage filling me—but it all came to a complete standstill when a warm hand brushed against my face.

My eyes opened, and the calm that came over me was almost otherworldly as I looked up at her serene face. The glistening green behind her tears, and the droplets of

moonlight on her pink lips, told me she was alive and reunited with me. The ‘what ifs’ didn’t matter.

I reached for her like she was the light and air at the end of a long dark, submerged tunnel.

To me, she was my salvation.

My fingers intertwined with her hair as they curved around her delicate neck, pulling her closer to me.

The scent of mint and poppies flooded my senses as she let out a soft, nervous breath. There was something about it that drove me wild.

I couldn’t help my smile turning into a greedy grin.

My lips found hers in the darkness—the darkness that’d seemed encroaching before was now encompassing us. It was as if we were being held by the obscurity of the night itself, allowing us to find a moment of peace.

Her fingers raked through my hair before forming fists and pulling me deeper into our kiss.

A wave of feral delight consumed me, and all I could think about was having her ... wholly and completely.

I wanted her to be mine. I wanted the world to know that she was not to be touched by anyone but me.

Those who dared to wouldn’t live to see another day.

Despite restraining myself, my claws stretched and ripped through my fingertips.

I wouldn’t allow myself to shift fully, but there were some parts of me I simply couldn’t hold back.

Things were different on the astral plane. Those times we’d been together there; I had been able to control what she saw of me with my head. But not here. Not now. I was just as helpless to her as she was to me.

I pulled my mouth away from hers slowly before looking down at my elongated claw.

She watched me carefully as I lifted that claw to the top of her dress where the expensive silk ribbon formed a crisscrossing pattern down the length of her torso.

“You won’t be needing this anymore,” I grumbled with a hint of disdain.

As beautiful as she looked in this dress, it couldn’t lessen the rage I felt knowing that it had been created for her to appease that bastard.

My claw ran down the ribbon, snapping each overlapping section of it until the corset came loose.

My eyes flashed back up to hers to make sure that she was comfortable. Watching her nervously biting down on her bottom lip, sent an even greater surge of excitement stampeding through my blood.

Her chest rose and fell against the loose material, pushing her breasts up toward me. “Tell me what it feels like ... when you transform, I mean.”

“That’s hardly a conversation I want to have right now,” I laughed, but her face contorted in a way that compelled me to answer her.

I sighed heavily before conceding to her, smiling and shaking my head.

Since when has she had me dancing to her every whim?

If I was honest with myself, beneath all the initial fury and hatred, I’d wanted to see her happy almost right after we’d met in my garden that fateful night—her an intruder and thief, and me the raging Beast who had just gotten his curse activated by a seemingly selfish human girl.

Little had we known that both our lives would be forever changed from that moment on.

“It feels like every cell in my body is being torn to shreds and remade, over and over again. It never gets easier. The more volatile your wolf is, the more painful the transformation. Some can change without much pain at all. However, since I am an Alpha Wolf and the leader of my kind,

my transformation is far more agonizing than any other,” I stated matter-of-factly because it was the reality of my existence.

I never had the option of questioning why it had to be that way. It just always had been my lot.

Sophia could never understand what that part of my life was like, neither would I ever want her to anyway.

“Thank you...”

Her response caught me off guard. I tilted my head at her slightly, but didn’t say a word as I waited for her to continue.

“...for telling me.”

I stared at her in awe. “You’re something else.”

I didn’t know what I was expecting exactly, but perhaps I hadn’t anticipated her to accept that part about me so readily.

I drew her into my arms, falling deeper and deeper into the blissful oblivion of our bond.

Skin against skin, my fingers explored her naked torso. They traced a delicate roadmap of discovery, following every beauty mark as they led me to her belly button.

From there my eyes traveled back up again, taking their time as they journeyed to her fiery locks spread out around her head. I found myself marveling at the way it fell and crashed onto her shoulders in luscious red waves.

Even the few curls that refused to go with the grain, dangling over her forehead and getting caught in her long eyelashes as she blinked up at me, were infinitely precious, too.

It felt as if I was seeing her for the first time all over again. My entire world shifted over on its axis, just as it had that night I’d found her among the Fae Flowers growing in my garden, attempting to steal from me.

I pulled her closer to me, drawing her shoulder into my chest. The moment her birthmark touched my marking, an intense static sort of energy crackled through me from head to

toe. It then charged right back to my chest, jolting my heart into a pulsating frenzy.

She must've just gone through something similar, for her hands suddenly became forceful against my chest, seeming to want nothing else but to push me as far away from her as possible.

Eyes wide and out of breath, she asked, "What the hell was that?"

"A second mate," came tumbling from my mouth just as it entered the back of my mind, as if it had been whispered to me there.

The sheer impossibility of it aside, what other explanation was there?

From the moment I had laid eyes on Sophia, I'd known there was something different about her. Yet, I had denied it with my every breath. I'd even sought to harm her if only to dispel what I subconsciously knew to be the truth.

For whatever reason, the Goddess Helene had bestowed upon me another mate.

Her gaze shifted down to my lips in disbelief, as if the words had caught her off guard as well, but then she tore her eyes away to the side as she asked, "Do you think it's possible for a shifter to love a human?"

"Helene, our Goddess of the Moon, doesn't grant a second mate easily—it's so unheard of, in fact, that it's something only mentioned in shifter mythology," I said, looking down at her thoughtfully, though she still wouldn't return her eyes to me. "So, for a human to imprint with a shifter, that's so unusual that I can't help but wonder if it's some kind of trick..."

I still wanted to say that we couldn't entirely rule out the possibility of this being a mind subterfuge planted by the Fae King somehow. But my thoughts trailed off when her eyes flashed and narrowed at me, the corner of her mouth pinching as if she was trying to keep it from quivering.

An icy lance arrowed through my chest. I'd been trying to explain things to her logically, but seemed to only have made things worse.

"It's not an error simply because you're human," I blurted, my voice sounding desperate even to my own ears. "I'm sure the Goddess has her reasons for bringing us together."

She saw right through me. "You don't truly believe that. There's something else—something you're not telling me."

I let out a long sigh in defeat.

Has she always been this perceptive, or is it a recent development?

"The Goddess protects my kind. She has always made decisions based on what serves the strength and continuation of the shifter race best," I said with difficulty, knowing how it must have sounded to her. It only made me more regretful of what I had to say next. "But to have the Alpha King imprint on a human that's not capable of giving him a true shifter heir..."

Her eyes lowered, almost closing as she pressed her lips together into a hard line. "So, I was a mistake." It wasn't a question.

"Sophia, you have to know that I don't give a shit about all that." The certainty of my words settled into the steady beat of my heart. "I only care that you're by my side. I know that now more than ever before. When you were gone and I didn't know if you were all right, I was going out of my mind. I couldn't bear the thought of losing you."

That still didn't seem to reassure her. She looked away from me again, and crossed her arms over her bare chest. Where she'd been confident and enraptured just a moment ago, self-consciousness and discomfort were emanating from her now.

"Look at me," I commanded in a soft tone, though I felt like screaming.

Her eyes drew to mine with a sad weariness that I was all too familiar with. "Even if it defies the moon and stars above us, I will never see you as a mistake."

“The day will come when you require an heir,” she said flatly, but the shimmer in her eyes told a different story. “What will you do with me then?”

Having an heir one day was beside the point. The truth was, it didn’t matter how badly I wanted to be with her, it was still too dangerous for her in this forest. With my kingdom still overrun by those vile Dark Fae creatures, I couldn’t allow her to be by my side.

“I won’t ‘do’ anything to you,” I almost growled. “Nothing will change the way I feel. The rest we’ll just have to figure out as we go...”

My eyesight began to blur, suddenly distorting the image of her beautiful face.

No ... not now. I’ve hardly had any time!

I clutched my face, dragging my nails against my skin, as if that was going to refrain me from losing myself. I took in a deep, heaving breath, feeling the otherworldly control entering my body.

I flung myself to my feet and away from Sophia.

“Kaine! What’s wrong?” she said, instantly sitting upright and watching me in horror.

I dug my hand into the side pocket of my tattered pants, gathering the potent black powder I’d been holding onto for just this moment.

“I’m sorry—we didn’t have more time.”

“What? Kaine, I don’t understand—!” She stumbled to her feet, about to take a step toward me, but I held up my other hand to stop her.

I pulled a handful of the powder out and held it in front of my mouth, taking a deep breath.

I’ll come find you when this is all over...

A strong gust of air blew from my lungs, sending the fine black dust into the air around Sophia.

I regretted having to be forced to do this to her, even if it was necessary. But that didn't make watching how violent coughs racked her body before her movements calmed and her eyes became heavy any easier.

For a time, she wavered in place before succumbing to the sleeping powder. I caught her right before she hit the ground, and slowly lowered her the rest of the way.

Her bright red hair covered the forest floor beneath her head like a river of fire. Her pale skin looked pearlescent in the droplets of moonlight beaming through the branches overhead. Her long lashes fluttered like a newborn butterfly.

"I have underestimated your strength time and time again, but know that this time is different. I do not seek to send you away because I think you aren't capable." My frigid knuckles brushed the side of her face. "I cannot focus when you are near. If I know that you're in danger, I will come running even if it means I sacrifice this entire realm doing so. My allegiance to you is too powerful..."

She turned into me, furrowing her brows slightly in protest.

I stared down at her, stroking her hair, committing the sight and feel of her to memory. "Letting you go is more difficult than I thought it would be," I laughed to myself, raising my head at the empty darkness surrounding me.

It was no longer a blanket of comfort. It was a void—a tomb of uncertain futures.

Is this the last time I'll see her?

I didn't even want to confront the possibility that I'd never get the chance to hold her like this again. My eyes shut tightly as I pulled Sophia's limp body into my chest.

"Helene," I implored. "Give me strength to bring her home to me. Let this not be our last time together."

When I opened my eyes again, I was blinded by the luminescence of the moon, suddenly much brighter than a moment ago. Sophia and I were encircled and completely bathed in it.

I couldn't breathe through the lump in my throat, and my heart pounded against my ribcage like a hammer set on breaking itself out.

I crouched over her body protectively, but I relaxed the following moment when I was overcome with a warmth and comfort so compelling, that no one could ever mistake it for anything else.

This light wasn't a threat. It was a promise.

"My child." A disembodied, ethereal voice surrounded me. "Why do you wallow in a future that is not yet determined? Have you lost your faith?"

"Helene," I breathed out as reassurance surged within me. "I'm struggling with this path you've set before me. The Dark Fae have taken my kingdom and the Spirit of the Forest. The shifters have all but been wiped out. But even so, my greatest fear is that I will lose her."

Helene was silent for a moment, almost as if she was surprised by my words. "You must keep to your task. Your destiny will follow. Whether or not the human girl will be involved in that, remains to be seen."

My eyes trailed away from the empty moonlight in front of me to Sophia's sleeping face cradled to my chest. "She'll never cease being in danger if she's around me... Will she?"

The air around me was silent again. Each passing second felt like another pound added to the weight on my shoulders until my Goddess decided to have mercy on me.

"A human's life is short and fragile compared to the life of a shifter. However much time you might have with her, it will never be enough for you. But this is hardly your most pressing concern right now, is it, Alpha King?"

"I understand, my Goddess," I said quickly, bowing my head. "I will not fail you or my destiny."

Then, as suddenly as the moonbeam had appeared, it retracted and disappeared, and I was once again consumed in the darkness of the forest.

I lifted Sophia along with me in my arms as I stood up. I knew what I had to do, I just questioned if I had the strength to see it through.

Wiping my rogue tear from her cheek with my thumb, I lowered my lips to hers and said, “You have your world, and I have mine. Live well and never lose that kind heart of yours. Maybe we’ll be more fortunate in our next lives.”

SOPHIA

S jolted up in bed, looking around in a panic.

As my heart and breathing tried to catch up, words that I could scarcely remember echoed in my mind like a distant dream.

The only grounding thing I could focus on was the extreme dryness in my mouth and throat. It was as if I hadn't drunk anything in days.

I didn't recognize the room at all, but the bed had a familiar stiffness to it. I had gotten so used to feathered mattresses that I had forgotten what it was like to sleep on hay. The feeling reminded me of home.

The room I was in was small and painted in a quaint sage green. Sunlight leaked in through the small window to my left, but the glass was too dirty for me to be able to see the view beyond it.

I shifted my legs over the edge of the bed, only realizing then how weak I truly felt.

What's wrong with me? I feel as if I've been asleep for a year!

I looked down at my thigh, smacking it a few times as though that could make my muscles feel more responsive.

"Wake up!" I hissed through my teeth as I slapped both my cheeks at the same time with open palms.

Once I thought I had gathered enough of my bearings, I stood up and made my way over to the window with careful

steps.

My sleeve dragged against the glass, picking up the dirt and cobwebs that had accumulated over it. This cleared it enough so that I could see through it, but the scenery before me still offered no clarity as to where I was.

Outside was a field of tall green grass, spotted with colorful wildflowers swaying back and forth, caught in a gentle breeze. Now that I was closer to the window though, there was a strange roaring, stormy noise I could hear coming in quick intervals from outside as well.

As my eyes traveled to the far left, I saw it—the ocean in the distance. A blue-gray watery expanse, stretching toward the horizon as far as the eye could see; just like the many books I'd read about it described. And also, as the books said, the water crashed, wave after powerful wave, against the rocky shore, which was the source of those booming sounds.

I suddenly wanted nothing more than to run outside and see it up close, feel it, but a second later my heart came to a skidding halt.

If I'm seeing the ocean ... then that must mean—

Every map of the Larose Kingdom I'd ever had the chance to study had shown that the ocean was very far away from the mainland, no matter from which direction you looked at it!

What the hell happened?

The door creaked open behind me, and I twisted around so quickly that a spurt of pain ran down my neck. I let out a little yelp, clamping my hand down over my neck, but the sting quickly faded away as I recognized the intruders.

Five heads poked in past the threshold of the door. Ten watery pairs of eyes watched me with shy uncertainty.

“By the Gods...” I whispered in disbelief. “How can this possibly be?”

“Sophia!” A menagerie of cries flooded into the room as all my siblings rushed at me.

I fell to the ground and hit the hardwood with a thud as they piled on top of me. They all spoke simultaneously, but I was able to gather that they'd missed me, crying as they asked me where I had disappeared to all those months ago.

"Goodness!" I laughed, only because I couldn't fathom another reaction.

I had never expected to see a day when they were this happy to see me again, but a comforting sense of belonging filled my heart. A feeling I had never known before, especially not where my brothers and sisters were concerned.

Isadora, Hydrangea, Peggy, Tomas, and Demitri. All here and celebrating me being reunited with them...

"We're so very sorry for being horrible to you. You are our sister, and we should have treated you as such," Hydrangea, our eldest sister, sobbed before laying her head on my shoulder.

"Will you ever forgive us?" Isadora chimed in.

A twinge of anger flinted through me like a spark. It was alive and then it was dead the next second. That voice echoed in my mind again.

Never lose that kind heart of yours...

"Of course." I smiled and hugged them with all my strength. "You don't even have to ask. You're my family."

But then I remembered why I'd been away from them for so long.

Kaine.

I pulled away with a renewed sense of worry. "How did I get here? What happened?"

I was so caught up in the joy of seeing my family again that I had all but forgotten how strange and confusing this all was.

My family had lived on the outskirts of a village in the Tierra Lowlands for generations. They had never even traveled outside of that area.

“A mysterious man brought us here. He bought us this house and told us to stay far away from our old home for our own safety,” Tomas, the youngest of my siblings, born only a year before me, stated despite the other’s trepidation at the topic. “He also told us to take good care of you.”

“Did he say where he was going?” I pressed, grabbing Tomas’s slender shoulders.

Tomas stiffened under the intensity of my grip, and replied nervously, “No, all he said was to make sure that you stay here and not try to follow him.”

Demitri placed his hand on my wrist, prying and pulling it away from Tomas’s shoulder. Though he did it gently, the reprimand was clear. I had to get a grip on myself, and not scare my little brother.

I pulled my hands into my chest, rubbing them against each other nervously. My whole body revolted against the idea of staying here while Kaine was in possible peril out there.

The Dark Fae... Prince Nikolai...

No, I couldn’t let him face them alone. “I know it goes against what you were told to do, but I have to get back home,” I said, eyeing every one of my siblings imploringly, the panic stuck in my chest swelling and swelling with every passing moment. “I need you to tell me where we are.”

All of them simply stared at me silently, unwilling to tell me a lick of information.

“Please. It’s of grave urgency that I get back to him,” I pleaded, folding Peggy’s warm hands within mine, knowing that she was the most likely to crumble. “What if something happens to him because I wasn’t there to stop it?”

She turned her head away quickly, mashing her lips together as her chin trembled.

“And what about you?” Isadora pouted at me. “What if something happens to you because we let you go? This man you’re seeking to protect was very adamant that we keep you safe here. I’m sorry, Sophia, but I can’t bear the thought of

losing you again. Not when we spent the last few months wondering if you were even still alive.”

I nodded my head slowly in defeat, looking down at the wooden floorboards beneath us. After some deliberation, I said, “Leave me be. I need to lie down awhile.”

My brothers and sisters all looked at one another with regret before getting up from the floor and leaving the room.

As soon as I was alone, I collapsed into myself, bringing my hands to my face to muffle the sobbing I couldn't hold at bay any longer.

Why would he just abandon me like this?

How far was I going to have to trek to get back to him? Even if I began my journey now, would it be too late?

How long had it taken him to get us here though? Judging by how weak my body felt, I'd been asleep for a long while—maybe even well over a week, while also taking into account that we were by the shoreside.

As I searched through my memory, I tried to recall the last thing I remembered before waking up here.

There was a cloud of black powder being blown at me by Kaine...

That stuff must have been what put me to sleep!

Did that mean he'd planned for this even before he had found and rescued me from that monster Prince's clutches?

The fridity in my chest boiled away in an instant, anger flaring and spreading from there like a forest fire.

Why can't he just trust me?

I supposed running out into the middle of a battle between him and the Dark Fae had not incited much faith in my ability to keep myself alive.

I let out a frustrated groan as I slammed my fists down on either side of my legs, the wooden planks creaking beneath me from the impact. “Dammit! I refuse to just sit here quietly and wait,” I said as I pushed myself up to my feet.

Though the bedroom window was nearly shut forever by the look of how bloated the wooden frame was, I managed to force it open quickly—even with my shaking arms. A rush of air that tasted salty in my mouth breezed against my face. The fresh, saline scent eased its way through my body, dousing some of the fire and tension there.

I didn't want to risk the chance of my siblings trying to stop me, so I climbed quietly through the window frame. My bare feet soon found solace in the lush grass below, some of the blades tickling me between my toes.

All right. First things first, I need to find out where I am.

I looked about, but there seemed to be nothing but undisturbed nature for miles and miles all around. Other than in the direction of the ocean, there were only rolling hills with wildflowers for as far as the eye could see. There were hardly even any trees in the distance.

It was in stark contrast to our homestead, where I had gotten used to living so close to the dense forest by the outskirts of the village. Even my time at Kaine's castle. I'd always been surrounded by many trees. I strangely felt naked without them now.

Following the sound of crashing waves, I started treading my way through the tall grass. They brushed against my legs and hands as I went.

The farther I left the house behind me, the clearer the deep blue running along the horizon became. My eyes widened in awe as I watched how the unimaginably vast stretch of water before me glistened with golden sunlight.

Then there was the roaring and crashing of the waves that were louder now, too. The way the foaming stampede of water exploded against the rocks was terrifying yet wonderful at the same time.

“Sophia!” A familiar voice called out to me.

I turned to see my father waving at me from the front porch of the cottage. I could hardly believe what I was seeing. He was standing up straight, without his cane.

Without hesitation, I ran back to him. By the time I reached the porch, and was holding his hands in mine, my sight was blurry and my cheeks wet.

He looked tired but his eyes gazed at me with nothing but adoration. He smiled as he shook his head in disbelief. “My dear girl, I cannot believe that you are here, returned to us.”

“I can scarcely believe it myself.”

I was overjoyed to see the light behind his skin. He no longer looked like he was made out of paper and glass, even though he still seemed a bit ill. But what I was looking at was a miracle. He wasn’t a man knocking on death’s door anymore.

Whatever Kaine had done for him, it had helped him better than any normal medicine ever could have.

“Come, my darling. We have much to discuss.” His face became slightly serious as he placed his hand on my back and led me inside.

I followed without protest and sat down at the kitchen table as my father brewed us some tea.

“Tell me how you came to be in good company with a creature of the Forest of Sorrows?” he asked, a strange lilt to his tone, with his back still turned to me.

“You met him as well then ... the Alpha King?” I spoke quietly, as if Kaine was some horrific secret to keep to myself. I was worried my father might reprimand me for keeping ties with such a dangerous creature.

“Indeed,” he responded curtly, alerting me to the fact that he wasn’t pleased. “I grew up on more stories of the Forest of Sorrows than you children have. I was around when the Great Plagues began, as a result of the Larose Kingdom at war with the forest. The rot and ruin the creatures from there brought upon our land was nothing short of hellish. There wasn’t a man, woman, or child that was spared from their wrath.”

“Their homes were invaded first, father... Their people slaughtered.”

“You’re just like your mother,” he said, chuckling weakly to himself. “After spending some time with these creatures ... your heart can’t help but bleed for them.”

The tea cups clanked delicately against their saucers as he brought them over to the table. His hands were trembling, but not from weakness.

“I never knew you had such a hatred for the forest, father. You barely wanted to speak about it while I was growing up, no matter how much I begged you to tell me more about the legends connected to it.”

“I had my reasons for it,” he said as he stood there looking down at me over the steaming teacups. “I didn’t want to plant the seed of curiosity in your mind. Young children—when they hear that something is dangerous or off-limits, their first instinct is to test that theory. I didn’t want to risk you entering too deep into that forest. I did what I thought was best for your protection... I don’t know what else I could have done to protect you.”

As if they had become too heavy, he dropped the teacups to the tabletop. They shattered and boiling tea erupted everywhere.

“Father, are you all right?” I jumped up, pulling him away from the hot tea and broken ceramic shards.

I helped him over to the closest chair away from the mess so that he could rest.

“I’m sorry, dear. I’m still not as strong as I think I am.” He shook his head in embarrassment.

“Don’t worry about it,” I smiled, taking the seat next to him. “I’m just glad to see you up and about. It does my heart good knowing that you’ve improved so much while I was away.”

“It’s the strangest thing. A few days after you went missing, I was able to get out of bed. I worried that you had gone and done something terrible, and made some deal with a devil for my health.” He covered his eyes with his shaking hand.

Deal with a devil? Sounds like he's familiar with the Dark Fae's bartering system.

I tilted my head curiously. "Father, what aren't you telling me?" I pulled his hand down from his face, forcing him to look at me.

He turned his head away without a word.

"How can I know what to fear if you never tell me?" I tried to ease his mind.

He let out the stale air from his lungs before giving me a tentative sideward glance. "You're right. I should have told you a long time ago, but it was never a burden I wished for you to carry."

I clenched my teeth and tightened my fists in preparation. Whatever it was that my father had been keeping from me, it must have been something truly bad.

I locked my nervousness into the pit of my stomach, and motioned for him to proceed.

"It happened twenty-three years ago," he said, his eyes falling to his lap, though he was looking at something past his hands folded together there. "It was a few days after you were born..."

ALMON

*H*er words rang out within me, slowly burrowing their way into my head.

Don't you want to save your daughter?

Everything in my being told me that the old woman under the bridge could not be trusted, but sheer desperation had taken me far beyond the point of reason.

I didn't care about my own well-being, only that my newborn daughter could live to see a full life stretching out ahead of her.

My dear Sophia, this world is cruel, but you deserve to see the beauty in it.

She deserved to grow up to see the sun rising in the east and setting in the west, day after day. She deserved to discover the stars in the night sky for the first time and wonder what they were and where they came from. She deserved to laugh and cry and love. She deserved all life had to offer.

I tore through my library, looking for the old book of fairy tales I'd grown up reading. I remembered it containing a story about a man who'd made a bargain with the devil in the forest.

His wish had been granted, but not without a great cost. But, as the story went for that man, the price didn't matter to me either.

"Ah-ha!" I pulled a taut leather-bound book from the back of my shelf.

It was covered in dust from the many years of disuse. I cracked open the book just as the door opened behind me. I first thought it might be one of my children, but it was my wife who was still weak after giving birth.

She watched me with sorrowful eyes. “What did the doctor in town say about Sophia?”

“Nothing we haven’t already heard from him. He’s not going to be of any help to us.” I turned away from her to hide the rage building up anew within me.

That doctor didn’t care about anything but himself. And coin. He was a greedy and atrocious man. If only he wasn’t the only doctor within a hundred-mile radius...

“What do we do now?” Her voice was meek, as if she was already fearing the worst.

The answer should have been nothing. There was nothing we could do for a baby that was born with a weak heart. There were no advancements in medicine that could fix something so serious... Nothing in the natural world, at least.

The conversation should have ended there. But I couldn’t in good conscience keep what I knew from her—even the mere thought of her breaking under the weight of hopelessness was unbearable enough already.

“There is something else—something we haven’t tried ... but it’s dangerous,” I warned as I stood up and brought the book over to her. “And there’s no guarantee it will even work.”

“Anything is better than doing nothing.” She grabbed the book and started reading. Soon she seemed to have figured out what she was reading, and what I was proposing. “We know firsthand what those monsters are capable of. Is this truly our last resort?”

“My dear Edith,” I said as I reached for her hand and held on tight. “What choice do we have?”

She lowered her head slightly in an uncertain nod, but it was enough to spur me into action.

“We shall leave now then.” I began collecting our coats. “We cannot waste another second.”

It was going to get dark soon, and I knew I’d never forgive myself if Sophia slipped away during the night. Time was of the essence.

Edith shrugged herself into her coat, wrapped a scarf around her neck, and gathered the baby into a warm bundle as I hollered to the rest of our five children to meet me downstairs at the entrance of our little house.

Hydrangea, Peggy, and Demitri came out carrying Isadora and Tomas.

I looked to Hydrangea first, placing my hand on her shoulder which was something I only ever did when I needed her to take me seriously.

“Now, you children must listen to me very closely. Your mother and I will be gone for the night. In the meantime, you must take care of each other and protect this house. Under no circumstances are you allowed to go outside. I expect every one of you to be in bed at sunset. And I *mean* it.”

Peggy tilted her head at me, causing her blonde curls to bounce to one side. “Where are you and Mama going? Why can’t we go with you? Is it somewhere dangerous?”

“Of course they’re not going somewhere dangerous. They’re probably just taking baby sis to the doctor again.” Isadora rolled her eyes at Peggy.

I tightened my lips, unwilling to admit to them that we were indeed about to face danger. But at the same time, I silently vowed that I wouldn’t let any of my children become orphans. I was determined to return with their mother, and Sophia—healed.

I pulled all my children into my arms, and gave them a firm hug. I couldn’t help the sinking feeling in my chest as I held them to me. We were venturing into the unknown to chase down a fairy tale, while leaving my defenseless children alone at home.

I just hoped one day they might understand why we had to take this impossible chance.

We didn't know what to expect in the Forest of Sorrows, much less how we would have to go about finding the one we had to make the deal with, but my mind was made up. We were going to do everything we could to save our baby girl.

"But I don't want you to go, Pa," Demitri whined into my ear.

"I know, bud. We would never leave you like this if it wasn't important." I pulled away so I could get one last look at each of their concerned little faces.

"Is it really for Sophia?" Peggy asked with tears welling up in her big hazel eyes.

I nodded slowly.

They looked at each other as if in agreement, however, Hydrangea was the one to speak up. "If it's to save our little sis, then we can be strong until you and Mama get back."

"My brave children." I gave each a kiss on the forehead as Edith entered the room, carrying Sophia.

Her raspy, shallow breathing set me on edge. She was struggling so much already, that I wondered if she would even make a trip into the forest.

I couldn't allow my one sliver of hope to be drowned out by doubt. So I bottled it up, and shoved it deep into the back of my mind.

Edith gave each child a hug and a kiss, and all of them wished Sophia good luck before we stepped outside and closed the door behind us.

Gods, please protect them, all our children. They are all we have in this world.

We ventured forth, only reaching the deeper part of the forest just as the sun had completed its fall from the sky.

The darkness brought with it the eerie sensation that we were being watched, but whenever I looked around, there was

no one there.

We passed a circle of mushrooms, that we were careful not to disturb, and hopped over a sparkling stream. There was something about the water that made me want to reach down, scoop some up, and have a closer look at it. I ignored the urge and kept moving alongside it.

We followed the spring until the clear, shimmering water changed into a black murky swamp.

This was where I'd been told to go by the old beggar woman in the village earlier today, but everything about this felt wrong.

Edith's instincts must've been ringing in her blood as well. She grabbed my arm and tried to pull me back.

But it was already too late for us to change our minds.

"You're late," the enchanting voice of a man came from across the ravine. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't show."

As my eyes followed the voice up a small valley of jagged rocks and flowing black water, they caught the sight of a tall figure cloaked in black.

My breath hitched in my throat. There was a presence to him that was darker than the blackest night. Evil and otherworldly. Even the very air around us was frozen, as if we'd just stepped into the dead of winter.

"Come. Follow the path of the stream. Watch the rocks. They are not very forgiving of any missteps." He waved his hand as his alluring voice distorted for a moment.

For that split second, I was able to hear his real voice. The ghastly sound was indescribable. I'd never heard anything like it.

I looked over at Edith, questioning if we should proceed. Her bright green eyes were like spears cutting through me. *We're seeing this through*, they seemed to say with a single glare.

There wasn't a hint of hesitation in her eyes. She didn't care whether that thing over there, posing as a man, was one of the worst creatures in the forest or not. All she wanted was to save little Sophia's life.

I nodded my assent and continued leading the way, my resolve renewed by her unwavering strength. "Only step where I step. I'll make sure the path is safe."

"All right." Edith offered me the hint of a smile, with a soft blush on her cheeks.

Even at a time like this, I was reminded of how much I loved her. I let that feeling flow through me as we pushed onward. We made the trek up the narrow and slippery ravine without incident, and found the mysterious figure waiting for us when we finally reached the top.

He watched us silently from within that obscure hood of his.

Although I couldn't see his face, there was something about his stare that set my teeth on edge. But as much as I wanted to grab Edith and Sophia and run like hell, I stood my ground, staring him down in turn.

The figure then simply turned its back to us and continued walking deeper into the swampland down a small path.

On either side of the path was oily, putrid water filled with creatures I couldn't bring myself to even make eye contact with. The water bubbled each time they breathed out or growled.

The feeling of imminent danger only grew heavier the deeper we went into this strange place. Although all the land was said to be cursed, this appeared to be the source of it.

Even the trees didn't seem to be growing normally here. They were twisted and rotten.

The figure stopped us inside a circle where it looked like nothing would ever grow. Then he turned around and folded his long-gloved fingers into each other in front of him.

“Tell me, what is it that you desire?” His voice was elegant and melodious once again—manipulative.

“My daughter isn’t well,” Edith answered when I wavered. She looked down at Sophia as she stroked her tufted red hair lovingly. “I want her to be healthy and live a long time.”

The hooded figure lowered his head in an unnatural manner, as if his neck was broken. He moved closer to Sophia to inspect her more carefully. It took everything within me to not tackle him away from her.

“I see. A weak heart. Not something easily repaired.”

“Please, we’ll do anything,” I begged.

His head snapped to me, and although I couldn’t see his face, the horror of his smile chilled me to the core.

“Anything?”

“We don’t have much to offer.” Edith spoke in a low voice.

I prayed that what we had brought with us as payment would be enough.

“That simply isn’t true, sweet Edith,” he crooned, turning his attention toward her.

How does he know her name?

“I know your name, too, Almon. Son of Seyfre,” he laughed, somehow softly but maniacally as well.

He knows my father’s name too?

“I know all things that pertain to my people.”

I squinted at him in disbelief. “How does a family of farmers concern you?”

He extended out his long finger, and it was at this point I realized he wasn’t wearing gloves at all. His skin was mottled and leathery from age. They looked like they belonged to a dried corpse.

“Not *your* family.” His long, gnarly finger moved slowly until it pointed at Edith. “Hers.”

“Mine?” Edith stepped back a bit, startled by this accusation.

“But that’s a story for another time,” he said, holding up his palm to us and cutting the conversation short. “Right now, you’re here for the child.”

Edith looked at me with bewilderment in her eyes, mine mirroring the same confusion back at her.

He must be playing mind games with us.

“As I was saying. We don’t require money. Just a simple sacrifice—something given willingly, or else it will not work.” He hunched over so that he could leer over the both of us with the black void where his face should have been. “What say you?”

At this point, I didn’t want to see what was underneath the hood. I was sure it would be more horrific than I would be able to stand at the moment.

I trembled, unsure of what was to come. My eyes dropped to the barren ground around me, having to look away from him to find my voice again. “Fine. Whatever it is. I agree. Take what you want from me.”

“Excellent.” The word resonated through the air around me, sounding more and more sinister with each echo.

I shut my eyes tightly, imagining the faces of my children smiling at me. I recalled every laugh and every kiss—preparing myself for the worst.

A sharp, cold pain stabbed through my chest as if I was being impaled by an icicle.

It took a moment before I was able to hear Edith screaming my name. My eyes shot open, finding her face in the darkness.

She dropped to her knees; clutching Sophia closer to her chest for protection.

Slowly, my eyes dropped down to my chest to find the hooded figure had plunged his wretched claws into me.

A thick bile rose up in my throat, climbing higher and higher, until I was coughing it up. The taste of it was bitter and metallic, sort of like blood, but far fouler.

As he slowly inched his claws out of my chest, he pulled something transparent and golden out of me.

I had no idea what I was looking at. Part of me questioned if he was taking my soul from me, but that was impossible.

He placed the ethereal wisp into a small glass jar before tucking it into the sleeve of his long black cloak. He then hummed and moved his sleeve, as if weighing my payment.

“It’s not enough. I require another sacrifice.”

“What?” I shouted, but it only made me cough up more of that disgusting black sludge.

The creature turned to Edith, who turned away so that her body was between the hooded figure and Sophia.

“I’m not afraid to die. Take what you want from me, but you best keep your promise to save my daughter.”

“Such a brave girl,” he chuckled, clearly pleased about her submission given so readily. “I didn’t expect anything less from you.”

He raised his hand and motioned with his two fingers. A heavy gust of wind swept through us like a wild whirlwind, here one second and gone the next.

Before my very eyes, five levitating creatures with rounded bodies and small implike heads appeared.

Their skin was gray and speckled with warts.

“Cease her,” the hooded figure commanded, pointing his finger at Edith.

No!

I used what little strength I had to jump up and grab her, but just as my fingers grazed the bottom of her dress ... she was gone. She had slipped through my fingers like sand.

Edith... Sophia!

My eyes shot up to the figure that knelt down beside me, clutching Sophia in his repulsive hands.

“You put her down.” I slammed my fist into the ground.

“I’m keeping my promise,” he sneered at me before returning his attention to Sophia. “Sweet child. So young. So innocent. With this, your life be lengthened.” He reached into his chest with one elongated hand, and plucked something wispy and black from there. “And with a new life, comes a new destiny. One that will serve our purposes greatly.”

No... This isn't what we wanted!

My strength was fully depleted now. I couldn’t even bring myself to my feet. I had failed to keep my promise to my children. “I’m so very sorry...”

The black wisp disappeared into Sophia’s little chest, and she began crying.

The figure lowered Sophia to the ground next to me, and tilted his head with morbid curiosity. “Thank you for your sacrifice. I most certainly couldn’t have done it without you.”

Then, with another gust of wind, he was gone. They were all gone.

It was just Sophia and I who remained—her crying and me crumbling.

“What have I done?” I wept, holding a still-crying little Sophia to my chest as misery, guilt, and sorrow ate away at my lifeless heart.

SOPHIA

Tears dripped from my eyes as my heart wrenched from the story.

“Oh, Father. I had no idea that was what happened. Of course. It all makes sense now. That’s why my siblings have always resented me. Mother didn’t just disappear around the time I was a baby. She disappeared because of me.” I had to stand up from the chair and pace the room.

I was brimming with so many different emotions, I couldn’t decide on one. I was mostly awash with betrayal and sadness, but anger quickly reared the highest.

That damn bastard... The Dark Fae King has been following me all my life!

Not too long ago, I’d fallen for the same trick my father had. I had also allowed for that shady old crone to exploit my desperation. This whole thing had been a setup from the start...

But why? What purpose did I serve in his evil conquest?

Whatever plan he had clearly backfired because he’d tried to keep me away from Kaine. Otherwise, why had he pushed me out of the forest, and then blocked me from coming back in?

I needed to figure out what his plan had been, and how I’d ruined it. That was the key to destroying that Fae King monstrosity!

Finally, the emotion that took over everything else in the end was gratitude. “Thank you for telling me, Father. I’m sure with this information I’ll be able to better help Kaine and the others protect the forest—”

“Wait!” He jumped up to his feet and reached for my hand, stopping me from continuing. “You mean you’re not staying?”

My shoulders slumped as I frowned at him. The way he was looking at me was heartbreaking, but I couldn’t just abandon Kaine and the others. Even less so now that I knew being away from the forest played into the Fae King’s hands.

I *had* to go back.

“I can’t stay. For whatever reason, I’m an important element to the forest’s fate.”

“You think I’m going to let you go back there? Back to those dangerous creatures?” he asked furiously, his face turning to a sharp shade of pink. “What kind of father would I be if I let you do that?”

“The kind of father that trusts his daughter.” I might as well have been begging him on my knees.

His hand trembled as he shook his head, trying to find another reason to stop me. “But we just got you back...”

“I know,” I said, pressing my free hand into my chest, lowering my voice in the hopes of reassuring him. “Believe me when I say, I *need* to do this.”

“You’ve always been a free spirit. I’ve never been able to stop you from doing something you truly set your mind to. I knew eventually that it would be my downfall,” he smiled, a tear dripping onto the table as he leaned forward.

I was losing him. I could feel it.

“You’ve barely returned home and now you want to leave again. Even that creature warned us that if you returned to the forest, you would die. No, I won’t allow it!” He stumbled back into the chair and nearly fell over trying to sit down again.

“Father!” I surged forward and held him steady until he was able to find his balance. “You don’t understand... I love

him. I love him so much that I can scarcely be away from him without feeling like my heart will stop beating. If you ask me to stay away, then you might as well kill me right here and now. It will be less cruel.”

Everything was blurry from all the searing tears pouring from my eyes, but the feel of his hand pressed to the side of my face was the clearest thing in the world. “Oh, my dear girl. Just give us a few days with you.”

I wiped my wrist across my eyes in disbelief. “What?”

“Three days. That’s all I ask. Then—” He clenched his teeth together. “Then I will let you go.”

My head moved in a shuddering nod as I sniffled and wiped my face again. “Okay.”

He pulled me into his arms and hugged me harder than he ever had before. I shut my eyes and allowed myself to sink into it.



Three suns had set since my promise to my father, and I was leaving them once again. I didn’t feel quite ready for it yet, but I couldn’t wait any longer. I had wasted too much time already.

I kissed my family goodbye and went off toward the docks. According to my father, the village Kaine dropped us off in was called Drerue. The closest docks weren’t too far from where our new house was—hardly half a morning’s trek.

My father also told me that the journey here had taken them seven days to complete, and should also take me that long to get back to the forest again.

A boat’s horn rang out from behind the hill, pulling me from my thoughts.

I wasn’t used to walking uphill like this. Halfway up, my legs were already burning from the climb, but the sound gave me a jolt of adrenaline.

I finally reached the top and could see the docks below clearly now. “Almost there,” I encouraged myself. Going downhill was much easier at least.

Eventually, I found myself at the docks. A little worse for wear, but ultimately in one piece.

The dock was bustling with fishermen and commerce. Hordes of people came to buy the fish fresh off the boat.

There was something comforting about watching people living a normal life, going about doing menial things at their leisure.

“Miss, can I interest you in the fresh catch of the day? I’ve had a great haul this morning!” A small elderly man caught my attention.

“No, thank you. I’m looking for a merchant boat that might carry me across the water to the Tierra Lowlands.” I folded my hands together politely and smiled at him, but it was met with a look of confusion.

“Now why would you want to go that way, miss? They say that land is cursed and too dangerous to travel to anymore.” His icy blue eyes stared at me with remorse.

I stopped short. What did he mean cursed? “It’s my home.”

“I can’t guarantee there’ll be much of a home to go back to even if you set out now.” He lowered his head as if to apologize. “But if you’re really determined, Minther carries cargo from the Lowlands. He’ll actually be heading that way today, last time I heard.”

I followed his finger to find a heavy-set middle-aged man with shaggy brown hair and an eyepatch.

He didn’t look like the most trustworthy of men, but so long as he took me where I needed to go, I didn’t care. I turned to the elderly fisherman and thanked him before approaching the skeevy-looking man.

“Good day, sir. I—”

“Good morning, Madam! Let me guess. Can I interest you in a pretty dress to impress someone special? Perhaps a

perfume that smells like the realm's rarest flower? Tell me what you need, and I shall deliver," he drawled, and flashed a toothy grin at me.

I could tell he had done that pitch a million times over, but my smile remained plastered on my face through it all.

"None of those," I said, keeping my tone light and friendly. "I merely require passage to the Tierra Lowlands."

The smile instantly dropped from his face. His brows furrowed, and he waited for me expectantly, as if I was about to admit to some prank or something. After a minute of silence, he realized that I was not going to.

"By the Gods, little lady. Why would you want to go *there* of all places?"

"It's important I return as fast as possible. My reason doesn't matter. I can pay you." I pulled out a small sack of gold coins, courtesy of Kaine. I was sure he'd imagined this would be used to give us a good new life here, not to return to my old one.

Minther's eyes nearly rolled back into his skull upon hearing the cling and considerable weight of the pouch when it hit the makeshift wooden table in front of him. "If that's really what you want. I will take you, but be warned. It isn't like you remember it."

"It doesn't matter."

He looked me dead in the eyes, took the money, and smiled. "Well, all right then."



The ship didn't set out until nightfall.

By then, I was already weary from the sun and waiting around. It took everything in me to stay awake.

And as it turned out, I wasn't the only one seeking passage on this merchant ship. This seemed to be a common occurrence for Minther.

I kept my head down for five days, hardly speaking to anyone. I'd never traveled like this before, and I didn't know who to trust.

Not that anyone really paid me any mind in any case. This gave me a lot of time to think at least. I needed to figure out why I seemed to be a determining factor in whatever the Dark Fae were planning.

What threat did I pose to them by being around Kaine?

Come to think of it, weren't they the ones who led me to him in the first place?

What was up with that then?

It didn't take a scholar to figure out that the old beggar woman under the bridge was working with them in some way. Hell, maybe it had been the Fae King himself, disguised as a human.

A tune in my mind distracted me from my deep thoughts. It was so lovely—prettier than anything I'd ever heard.

Where did that just come from?

I looked up from my lap to see an endless starry sky. And below, the water was calm, reflecting the specs of light right back up again. If there was a name for what I was seeing, it would have been called, Infinite Night.

Then I heard knocking on the side of the boat, as if someone was knocking on a door to enter. I looked over the side of the boat to see a blue luminescent glow. I perched myself on the side of the boat to get a better look.

Before I knew it, I was surrounded by every man onboard the ship, and they were looking over the edge of the boat same as me.

“Men, stand your guard! We are being attacked!” Minther burst out from the captain's quarters, shouting orders while stuffing cloth in his ears.

Attacked?

I looked once again at the water crashing into the side of the ship, and gasped when I saw what looked like a glowing woman overboard, though she was keeping up with the speed of the ship.

The woman made direct eye contact with me, and raised her hand up out of the water, beckoning me over to her.

She's so stunning...

Her mouth opened out of the water, and I realized that she had been the one singing all along.

What a beautiful song...

Then a faint voice inside my mind said, *Come in. We can take you where you need to go. We just want to know where you took her.*

Took who? I thought back at her, feeling myself leaning more and more over the edge of the boat.

A sickening feeling twisted my stomach into knots, causing me to pull back from the edge.

It wasn't until I broke eye contact with the pearlescent woman that I realized she had some kind of unnatural lure about her, and that she was trying to trick me so I'd jump overboard. I looked around at the other men who were now falling like apples from a tree, splashing one after the other into the cold black water below.

Adrenaline rushed into my veins, springing me into action. If I didn't do something, then there wouldn't be any crew left to finish the journey.

"Don't listen to them!"

I shouted as I grabbed and pulled back two men who were about to climb over the side. But even though they weren't looking at the woman in the water anymore, they still didn't snap out of it. In a trancelike state, they simply kept trying to get overboard.

Desperate for help, I looked around in search of Minther, and found him standing at the helm of the ship. He was

holding a small flute tied to his neck by a thin black string. He held it to his lips and took a deep breath.

I watched in anxious confusion while still attempting to hold the two men at bay, but my strength was dwindling. Fast. I didn't know how much longer I could keep this up.

Then Minther began to play the small flute, and the men immediately stopped struggling against me. Their eyes lost their glassiness as they looked around in bewilderment.

They seemed to come to their senses quickly after that, and scrambled to get cloth in their ears as well. Some men even ripped their own clothes to cover their ears.

“Strange,” Minther said as he stomped heavily down the stairs, his eyes suspicious and never leaving mine until he was standing right in front of me. “You didn't need the flute to bring you back... Tell me, what are you?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, stumbling a step away from him—taken aback not only by his odd question but by his sudden intensity as well.

But we were interrupted when the boat started rocking violently from side to side, as if we were stuck in some great sea storm.

“What's happening?” I grabbed onto a rope to keep from sliding around the deck too much.

“Those sea creatures are upset I stopped them. They're trying to capsize the boat.”

“What can we do?” I cried out above the din of terrified men, creaking wood, and the splashing of violent waves all around us.

The rope was beginning to bite raw slashes into my palms as I exerted all my strength into holding on. But I was losing my grip more and more with each thrash of the ship.

My hold on the rope slipped and I was yanked and thrown to the side. As I was falling to the tumultuous deck, everything slowed. It was as if time itself had frozen in fear.

Cold seawater splashed into my face, burning my eyes. I squeezed them shut before trying to see where I was.

It was so dark.

The only noise that filled my ears was the crew's panicked screams.

But much too soon, time resumed and my back slammed into the wood railing on the side of the ship. I hollered out as agonizing stings surged through my body. Though I was in pain, I felt paralyzed.

The impact had probably hurt my spine, but it'd stopped me from falling into the violent ocean.

I tried and failed to get to my feet, but found I was able to use my hands to stop my face from hitting the floor at least.

The thrashing impossibly got worse. At this rate, we were going to capsize.

"If anyone's out there, please *help us!*" The prayer ripped from my restricted throat.

Kaine... All I want is to come home to you.

Tears began to drip down my cheeks, hitting the already wet wooden deck below.

I am so close.

I let out a heart-wrenching sob that echoed only in my ears.

Please, give me the strength I need to make it through this!

A warm glow, stemming from deep within my chest, spread through every part of my body. It was as if sunlight was pooling into my very bloodstream.

I was suddenly able to breathe without my entire upper body hurting. And as I looked down at my palms, they were aglow with a soft yellow light like I was holding a lightning bug in each.

I raised my hands to have a closer look at them, but the light quickly dimmed and vanished.

Did I just imagine it?

Whatever it had been, whether it was because of that glowing light or not, I didn't feel that intense weakness in my muscles anymore. Testing them out, I realized I was able to move my legs again.

I brought myself to my feet, looking around me. It was the complete opposite on deck than it'd been a moment ago. The ship was quietly drifting on the tranquil ocean surface again, and the crew was staring wide-eyed at each other as they tried to find their balance on a floor that wasn't going berserk anymore.

All was silent.

"What's going on?" I breathed to myself, not realizing there was a sailor behind me.

"Nothing good, Ma'am. That I know for sure." His congested voice startled me into snapping my head around to look at him.

"Has this ever happened before?"

"Aye, but nothing like this. I've never seen the sirens so rattled. Something has them spooked... Or angry." He looked at me, his black eyes burning into me as I tried to absorb all that he was saying.

Sirens?

I tore through my brain in search of some point of reference. I'd only ever heard of and read stories relating to the Forest of Sorrows for most of my life. Clearly, the sea had myths and legends of its own.

Sirens had to be something like the Dark Fae for the ocean since they were obviously bad news.

"At least it seems like they've stopped," I said, with a sigh of relief.

But I'd spoken too soon. A split-second later, the ship began leaning to one side, as if there was a constant wave pushing it over more and more.

I looped my arm through the wooden railing and watched in frozen horror as the side of the ship pressed against the black water below, like a maw opening to consume us all. Water poured in through the rails and washed over the deck, sweeping unsuspecting people into the darkness below.

I snapped my eyes shut, unable to watch any longer.

Just then, the force against the ship was released, and with a screaming moan of wooden boards rubbing against each other, the ship tried to return to its erect position. But the momentum brought the ship up too fast, and slingshot me into the water.

I cried out, but it was muffled by the water. Without thinking, I inhaled sharply, only to be met with a mouthful of seawater.

I opened my eyes just in time to see the lanterns on the ship go out, plunging me into true darkness.

My body ached as I tried to claw my way to the surface.

My eyes and arms felt heavy.

I'm not giving up. I'm going to keep fighting...

I just—need to rest for a moment...



A memory flitted through my mind, lighting up the vacuous darkness that filled it.

Before that, I didn't exist.

“Soph, stay with me.”

The flash of a familiar face brought me back from the precipice of nothingness.

My chest flooded with a familiar warmth.

My eyes opened to a clear night sky. Thousands of stars hung from there like diamonds.

I was at peace for only a moment, until I realized that I couldn't breathe. Choking and coughing, I lurched forward and pressed my mouth into the sand as I hurled up all the water that had taken up residence in my chest.

Panic took its place as I looked around me. Broken parts of the ship were spread everywhere.

Did anyone else make it?

Judging by the silence, I didn't want to know the answer to that.

“Sophia, you're alive!” a small, ethereal voice cried out.

Small white orbs began to glow around me.

“You're really here, aren't you?” One of the white orbs came closer until I could see a woman's face looking back at me. “I can't believe we found you, Soph!”

SOPHIA

I was given very little time to rest after the little Light Fae—who I'd come to call Blue Eyes—caught me up on what had been going on.

She was also the one who'd risked everything to guide me to Kaine as the battle with the Dark Fae had ensued. That had been almost two months ago now. She'd even saved my life back then.

The news of what had happened after that, while I'd been at Prince Nikolai's castle, and then away across the ocean, was hard to digest to say the least.

Why didn't Kaine tell me any of this after he rescued me?

"The Dark Fae have taken over Kaine's castle, which means that they now have complete control over the Spirit of the Forest," she explained as tears poured from her wide sapphire eyes.

Her tears, however, came in the form of small crystals. I watched in both awe and sorrow how they fell from her eyes, making delicate glass-like *pings* as they hit the ground.

"Kaine's castle has control over the forest?" I interjected in shock.

I had no idea it was so important. I would never have let him leave if I'd known this could be an outcome!

"Yes, and because of this, rot and ruin have been spreading throughout the land like a disease. The longer they hold power

over the castle, the more in danger the world becomes.” She ran her small hands through her frazzled white hair.

“What do you mean?” I asked, though I was almost too afraid to find out.

One of the other Fae answered, seeing as Blue Eyes was struggling to speak. “If the Dark Fae are successful, it’s not just going to be the forest that suffers. They will be able to take over—everything.”

My heart lurched to a complete standstill as I tried to contemplate what her words meant.

Everything? Does that mean the entire land? Other lands, too? The world?

Kaine had this much power under his reign? No wonder he always seemed to be carrying a heavy burden...

“And Kaine hasn’t been able to take it back this whole time?” I found that hard to believe.

Kaine wasn’t exactly the kind of creature to stand on ceremony.

The Fae all glanced at each other nervously before looking back at me. “It’s not exactly up to him.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s not just the land that they are able to control now. The Dark Fae control his Kingdom, and therefore have control over the Alpha King as well. The closer he is to the castle, the more influence they have over him.”

“Is that why he sent me away—to protect me from himself?” Even though his reasons for abandoning me in a strange land made more sense now, I still couldn’t help being enraged by it. “That fool. Doesn’t he know that I don’t care about that? Doesn’t he know that I would rather stay and help him fight to get his home back?”

I wiped away the angry tears skittering down my cheeks with the back of my hand. I only hoped I wasn’t too late to help.

Coughing filled the air as the rough shoreline washed up another person. I jumped up and rushed over to stop them from being pulled back out by the waves again.

A dark-skinned woman looked up at me weakly. She was wearing a soaked light blue cloak, and it seemed to be weighing her down considerably by how deep she was sunk into the sand.

And by how deeply her brows were furrowed as she looked at me, she wasn't happy to accept my help. In fact, she was more disgusted by my touch than thankful.

"It's all right," I said, letting her go and showing her my hands so she could see they were empty and harmless.

Her hands though, were another story entirely. She had claws that looked like they'd have no trouble gutting me with one single scratch. Actually, they appeared more like the spikes in the fin on a fish's back.

With one of those hands, she struck out at me, and I jumped back just in time before her claws were able to nick me. But I ended up stumbling and landing on my back.

"You!" She bared sharp teeth at me as she began crawling over the sand and right onto me. "You are the one I've been chasing. Where have you taken her?"

It wasn't until her lower half was no longer in the water that I saw she had a long fishtail instead of legs.

I looked up into her eyes and found that I was more mesmerized than scared somehow.

"Tell me. What have you done with my sister?" She pressed her sharp fingertips into my neck, threatening to slash my throat open if I tried to fight her.

"I don't know what you're talking about." The words were coming out of my mouth, but strangely, it was as if they weren't spoken by me—rather compelled *from* me. "I'm only here to find the Alpha King."

She squinted her eyes at me suspiciously and leaned in closer. "And why would a human like you be looking for that

creature?”

“Because I love him.”

She stared at me in disbelief—or more like puzzlement—for a while longer before retracting her claws. “That was an unexpected response,” she said, moving away from me.

I sat up, clutching my neck, checking to make sure she didn’t puncture anything. The second my gaze broke free from hers, I had a mind of my own again. “What was that?”

“Nothing for you to worry about now that I know you’re not guilty.” She turned her back to me and focused on her tail as it began forming into human legs. As she stood up on them before me, she was indiscernible from any other human.

I also returned to my feet. “Why would you think I was guilty?”

“I could tell from the start you’re human, but you *reek* of magic, so I figured you might have had something to do with my sister’s disappearance, or at least know something about it.” She glared at me from her peripherals before pulling down the hood of her cloak and shaking her long, dark hair out.

“Siren, I might know where she is.” Blue Eyes spoke up, catching her attention. “The Dark Fae that have taken over the Forest of Sorrows, have also been taking many magical creatures captive. If your pod swims anywhere near the shorelines where the forest meets the water, then it’s very likely she’s been taken by them.”

I looked over to the siren for her response, and her look of nonchalant aggression all but disappeared. “Can you take me to these Dark Fae captors?”

Blue Eyes was understandably reluctant to answer. The Light Fae had laws against inciting or getting involved in any sort of conflict.

But I had no such concerns. “I’m going. If you want to join me, I’m taking back the castle and freeing everyone that’s been taken.”

When her eyes shot to me, she seemed surprised and doubtful—even giving me the once-over as if she didn’t expect a scrawny human girl to be of any help to her, much less live up to the bold statement just made—but she quickly composed herself.

Back to being stoic and detached, she said, “I suppose if you can lead me to this castle, I’ll go with you. But let me make one thing clear, I’m not going to fight for you or your cause. Once I find my sister, you’re on your own.”

“That’s fine. I won’t ask you to stay and fight.”

How could anyone be asked to risk their life for something they only just found out about?

“Sophia Everly.” I extended my hand toward her and said with what I hoped was an encouraging smile, “Don’t worry. We’re going to find your sister.”

She glanced at my hand with derision, grasping only my pointer finger with a few of her fingers and squeezing before pulling back. “Sharra of the Bleek Waters.”

“Sophia, are you sure about this?” a wispy voice said softly into my ear.

I looked over my shoulder and nodded at Blue Eyes, who appeared to be more than a little distressed.

“All right then, I trust your decision,” she declared, and then pointed toward a thin line of trees and a long hill in the distance. “We’ll need to start making tracks to the village then.”

She made it sound like a quick walk there, but I knew we had a long way to go before we reached my village.

The thought alone filled me with anxious anticipation. I didn’t want to waste any more time traveling. Every step filled me with dread.

What if I was far too late to stop what was happening?



It took us three days of walking, with little to no rest, to reach Tierra Lowlands.

By the time we got to the village, it looked desolate, with a heavy atmosphere of darkness choking the air. The streets that were once bustling with commerce and people were now painfully empty.

We walked past the village doctor's house to find the door ripped off of its hinges, and a trail of blood leading down the cobblestone steps to the dirty street.

I averted my eyes just so that my mind didn't run away with me.

He was a horrible man, to be sure, but did he deserve that kind of fate?

"Should we even be walking out in the open in the middle of the night like this?" Sharra rubbed her arms as if she was trying to get rid of the eeriness surrounding us as well.

"Perhaps you're right," I admitted, unable to suppress the shiver in my voice entirely. "We should find a place to take shelter for the night."

I didn't like the idea of stopping, but the idea of being the next pool of blood being dragged through the street was even less appealing.

"Look over there... Looks like a candle." Sharra pointed at the village tavern that was all boarded up, but a small flickering light was barely visible through a cloth covering one of the windows.

"You're right. There must be someone inside," I mumbled quietly as I tiptoed closer to the building to investigate.

The entrance was barred shut, so there was no way we could get in that way.

"Maybe there's another door around back, or a window we can pry open?" I glanced over to Sharra, who was too busy

looking around to make sure we weren't being watched.

We snuck around the back as the wind whistled through the alleyway. I kept looking over my shoulder, thinking someone was right behind me.

I hadn't entirely believed Blue Eyes's claims, neither could I possibly have perceived the severity of it, until now. The Dark Fae truly intended for their rot and destruction to spread past the forest.

If things could go this bad in less than a month, I didn't want to imagine what they could do in a year...

Entering the dark alleyway, I ran my hand along the wall until I felt what I could only assume was a metal door. As my eyes adjusted a little more, I was able to find a handle, but it wouldn't budge. "It's locked up tight. There's no way we're getting in this way either."

"Move aside," Sharra hissed impatiently as she shoved me to the side. She grabbed the metal door handle and ripped it clean off as if she were merely picking an apple from a low-hanging branch.

Good Gods...

She pulled the door open and waved her hand dramatically, inviting me inside with a self-satisfied smirk.

The Light Fae made quick work of tucking themselves into the pockets of my coat. They likely wanted to avoid being seen by anyone we might run into inside the tavern.

And by the looks of it, I realized as we made our way through the kitchen and entered the main area, everyone who had been left alive was here. A quick count told me there were fifteen villagers. They were all huddled together, looking at us with fearful eyes.

"By the Gods... Is that one of the Everly children?" An elderly woman spoke up, causing everyone else to gasp in surprise, and then relief.

They began flooding me with questions as they came up to surround me.

“Do you have news of some kind?”

“Where have you and your family gone?”

“How did you know this was coming?”

“Is the forest to blame for this?”

My hands covered my ears as I looked down at the floor, trying to keep a level head. I felt like I was drowning in their fear and worry. There was no answer I could possibly offer them that would give them any kind of peace.

Sharra stepped in front of me, glaring every one of them down. The villagers retreated a step, and their questioning instantly halted. “Don’t you people have any decency? Can’t you see we’re weary travelers? We don’t know any more than you do. We’re only seeking shelter.”

Everyone mumbled to each other, clearly unhappy, but they backed off at least. Still throwing me looks that told me they’d try and corner me again another time, the villagers went and sat down at different tables around the tavern.

I looked at Sharra and mouthed a *thank you*, but she ignored it.

“Why don’t you two come and sit down then?” A strong male voice drew me away from my thoughts.

I looked up to see the pleasant face of a man smiling at me from the bar. He was tall with a long white scar across his tanned face. He would be perfectly handsome if not for that small imperfection.

The only issue I had with him was that I had no idea who he was. He wasn’t someone from the village. So what was he doing here?

I decided to accept his invitation nonetheless, but kept my guard up. I sat down next to him at the bar, leaving a barstool between us.

Sharra sat on the other side of him.

“You both look as if you’ve traveled far. Where did you come from?” he asked calmly as he took a sip from his cup.

“I came from across the ocean. I heard about what was happening here, and I had to see it for myself,” I said, eyeing him wearily, whereas Sharra looked like she was two seconds away from ripping his throat out.

He raised an eyebrow at me. “You come seeking the spectacle of death?”

“I come to administer aid where I can,” I shot back at him defensively.

“Aid you say? These people believe that the Gods have been angered, and that’s why all of this is happening.” He laughed lightly into his ale before looking back at me, holding my gaze with the strength of his. “So tell me, Miss Everly. What do you believe?”

His sharp blue eyes searched mine for answers I wasn’t willing to give him.

My fingers danced nervously on my lap under the bar, but I schooled my features to what could pass as confident defiance. “You speak as if you’re familiar with this place, and yet I know that you don’t live here. So, before I answer any of your questions, tell me why you’re here first?”

He shook his head with a slight smile twitching the corners of his mouth, as if he was enjoying our little back and forth. “I see we’re not going to get anywhere until one of us trusts the other... And well, I suppose I’m willing to make the first move.”

He then chugged the rest of his beer before slamming it down onto the counter, much to the dismay of the people around the room.

“Name’s Berrok Anton,” he said as he extended his hand out to me slowly. “I’m a creature hunter here on official business. The King requested that I investigate what’s been happening in the Lowlands.”

“A creature hunter?” I reiterated in disbelief. I didn’t think the creatures of the forest were such common knowledge to humans that hunters specifically for them existed.

My eyes flashed to Sharra, who was now looking quite pale.

“Fear not,” he said, smiling in a way that was oddly warm and calming. “I am not here to harm anyone or anything—not anything that’s good anyway. I only seek to investigate the cause of all this, and hopefully find a way to stop the violence and senseless destruction from spreading farther into the land.”

Sharra shook her head discreetly, signaling that we shouldn’t trust him.

“So, since you two don’t look like the type to hang around one place for long, is it safe to assume you’ll be leaving again tomorrow morning?”

“That’s none of your damn business,” Sharra hissed, shooting up from her seat to glare him down.

But Berrok appeared as unrattled as the sun against a storm as he looked up at her with a gentle smile. “Apologies if that sounded a bit too forward, ladies. I’m just putting it out there that I’m pretty handy in a fight, and that I’m not staying around here either.” He then turned to me, tilting his head innocently like a small child would. It made me want to trust him. “But if you prefer to take your chances out there alone, then who am I to stop you?”

“We don’t need a creepy bodyguard, thank you,” Sharra grumbled as she strode past him and started pulling me along with her by the arm. “Come on, let’s go somewhere *quieter* than here.”

I let her drag me out of my seat, but then planted my feet, and blurted out my split-second decision, “All right, we accept. We can use an extra hand where we’re going next.”

If he’s a creature hunter, he might be able to stand his own against a Dark Fae.

I couldn’t let any advantage we might have in taking back the castle slip through my fingers, no matter how much the siren’s furious glowering was pegging daggers into my back.

SOPHIA

The sun rose before I could get any real rest.

I was up all night thinking about Kaine and the others, praying they were safe. If the castle had been taken over by those vile creatures, then that meant everyone was in danger... Garmilen and Tieni.

Tieni... I miss her so much.

Despite me not living in Kaine's castle for all that long, she had become like the mother I never had. I felt safe when she was around.

"Sophia." Sharra approached the curtain that separated the wet wooden board I slept on from the others.

The roughly spun sack I'd used as a blanket scratched against my skin without mercy as I pushed it off of me to sit up.

Sharra knelt in front of me and held my gaze without blinking. "Time to go."

I nodded before crawling out of my makeshift bed. I was barely on my feet when Sharra grabbed my sleeve and dragged me out of the tavern. "What about Berrok?"

She hushed me, moving quickly through the side alleyway. The moment we reached the dirt road, we stopped in our tracks—or more like Sharra forced me to.

"Good morning, ladies. Late start?" Berrok startled both of us.

I looked over to see he was leaning against the entrance of the tavern, as if he had been waiting there for hours already.

“Damn,” Sharra mumbled under her breath, but then restarted her steps and stormed past him without as much as a glance.

As Berrok gathered up his pack from the ground, I gave him a shrug and a smile before running after the siren. He fell in behind us as we made our way in the direction of the forest.

The carnage around us was even more disheartening to see in the daylight. Again, I found myself fearing the state of the forest if the town looked like this. Would we even be able to reverse the damage if we removed the Dark Fae from power?

As we were exiting the town, we walked under the bridge where I’d met the old beggar woman who had told me about the Fae Flower.

So much had happened because of that woman. She had first tricked my father, and then me. She must have been working with the Dark Fae. Though I’d been able to surmise that much from both our experiences, I still couldn’t comprehend the purpose behind it all.

Part of me wished I’d never gone looking for that flower, and that I could go back to a time when things had been much simpler. The other part was glad, for if I hadn’t listened to that crone, I’d never have met Kaine.

“Wait,” Berrok’s voice rang out from behind us, sounding unsettled. “We’re entering the forest?”

I turned back to face him just as we reached the line of densely packed trees. “I believe I know where we’ll find the source of all this havoc, and it’s at the heart of this forest.”

“And how do you know that?” he asked, looking at me strangely, as if he was seeing me in a new light.

Sharra sighed impatiently ahead of us. “She just does, okay. You’re more than welcome to turn back if you’re scared.”

For a long moment he just looked at me, but his smile returned as he said, “No, I promised to see you ladies to your next destination safely. I don’t mind a bit of mystery. Just keep your guards up in there, all right?”

He didn’t need to tell Sharra though. She hadn’t let her guard down since he’d introduced himself as a creature hunter last night.

After giving him a small nod, I looked up at the tall trees before us. They’d become even more twisted since the last time I’d been here. The only leaves still clinging to the branches were dried out and gray.

An ominous wind drew through the trees, almost making a wheezing sound, as if the forest was breathing a sickly breath.

“What have they done to you?” I whispered to myself.

The magic that had once delighted me about the forest was dead and gone.

My fingers pressed into my chest, clutching my heart as if that would sate the aching.

I felt the forest’s suffering as if it were my own. “It’s so much worse than I thought.”

Sharra even managed to look concerned as she crossed her arms and rubbed her foot into the dried roots that seemed like they’d tried and failed to escape from the sickness. “I thought they were exaggerating, but this is pretty bad. At this rate, they could start poisoning the waters surrounding the forest.”

“See? We told you,” a small disembodied shout came out of nowhere. “Soon, everything everywhere will suffer and rot away.”

I turned to see one of the Light Fae appear out of thin air.

She was staring right at Sharra with her hands on her hips. “You can save your sister and run away, but soon there won’t even be a place left for your people to call home anymore.”

Sharra’s eyes went wide as her shoulders stiffened, unable to respond. She looked over to Berrok, who was stark still as he stared at Blue Eyes floating before him.

The Light Fae's righteous spunk diminished like someone threw water on a fire. She also turned toward the creature hunter as if she'd forgotten he was there.

"Is that—?" Berrok was in disbelief.

Sharra smacked Blue Eyes out of the air and over to me, and I caught her in my hands before tucking her into my pocket again.

"Whatever you thought you saw, you'd better unsee it." The siren was scowling at him so severely, even I felt my legs go a little weak.

But Berrok didn't seem to notice. He was looking at me with his jaw almost dropped all the way down to the ground. He managed to bring himself out of his daze and cleared his throat.

Pressing his hand to his chest earnestly, he said, "Please, you don't have to worry—I meant it when I said I'm not here to hunt anything good."

"The depiction of *good* is relative, and varies from person to person, and that's what worries me." I stepped away from him.

"Just give me the word, Sophia. I'll take him out right now." Sharra was chomping at the bit to draw blood.

"If I was lying, I would have killed your siren last night in her sleep." He pointed to Sharra, who was standing behind him with the same horrified expression I felt on mine.

"You knew?" she breathed, preparing her claws to attack.

"It's my job to find creatures that are magically inclined. I would be a terrible hunter if I didn't notice. Actually, what drew me to you both at first was Sophia. I thought she was the creature, but I realize now that what I picked up on must have been the Fae in her pocket. So maybe I am a terrible hunter after all," he scoffed at his mistake, scratching the back of his head as he laughed at himself.

I couldn't help but join in, also laughing at the absurdity that he'd actually thought I was more dangerous than a siren.

But I was mostly laughing out of relief.

“Terrible hunter or not, I’m still going to keep a close eye on you.” Sharra walked past him, hissing between her teeth.

Berrok looked at me, unphased by her threat, and smiled. Then he motioned to the tree line of the Forest of Sorrows with an unsuspecting charm. “Shall we then?”

I lowered my head and followed behind Sharra as we stepped over the boundary between the clearing and the forest. I was struck by the sickening miasma that hung above us. “Gods, what is that?”

“I’m not sure, but let’s try not to breathe it in.” Berrok tore off a piece of his coat and covered his nose and mouth with it.

I took my handkerchief and did the same.

“Stop!” Sharra jumped back and bumped into me. “There’s something here.”

I grabbed her shoulders to steady her. “What is it?”

Before she was able to answer my question, two figures began emerging from the shadows. Though I’d never seen any of the other creatures roaming the Forest of Sorrows, other than the shifters, water nymphs, Light Fae, and the Dark Fae, I saw a minotaur and a centaur for the first time.

I’d even read about them in Kaine’s magical library once. But my excitement quickly vanished. There was something very off about them.

Both the creatures’ coat hairs were falling out in patches, and their skin seemed to be growing fungus all over.

How is it possible for the Fae King to cause this kind of corruption, even in the beings that reside in the forest?

The power that Kaine held became more frightening every time I found out something new. It explained why he was mortal enemies with the Dark Fae.

As they approached us, the creatures appeared to be unmoved by our presence, though curious.

I took a deep breath and held it in as I stepped in front of Sharra. The centaur looked down at me with dull eyes, but nodded his head once in approval.

I stopped a few feet away from him, only realizing once I was closer how extremely tall he was. A nervous shiver ran through my body as he spoke with a booming voice that carried through the trees around us.

“Why have you come here?”

“I’m here to find the Alpha King and help restore his kingdom.” I rolled my fist into the palm of my other hand, while trying not to imagine him stomping me to death with those large hooves of his.

“The Alpha King is lost,” he said, his voice like a raging thunder in my ears. “His kingdom cannot be restored. It’s been foretold.”

Foretold?

“I don’t care what you say. It won’t stop me.” I stood my ground, the ferocity of my words surprising even me.

“You all should turn back now, while you still can. The beast that roams these lands does not take kindly to newcomers,” he warned as he lowered the human half of his body down to me.

“Beast?” I breathed to myself just as the sound of snapping branches and claws ripping through wood echoed in the distance.

“You must leave now!” Fear entered his eyes as he urged me away and waved to the minotaur to flee as well.

He didn’t need any convincing and quickly disappeared behind the trees.

“I told you. I’m not leaving!” I shouted even as Sharra grabbed my arm and tried to pull me away.

“Then there will be no saving you.” The centaur gave me a sullen look before galloping away.

SOPHIA

I remained standing there, unwavering as the sounds of tree bark being torn, and thick branches being snapped grew concerningly near. I could vaguely hear Sharra begging me to leave the forest with her, but I kept resisting her.

Berrok grabbed his crossbow and loaded it right beside me, but I quickly placed my hand over the weapon and shook my head. He didn't understand why, but he obliged begrudgingly.

Out of the shadows, suddenly, came a huge wolf-like creature with jet-black hair and a sharp, snarling grin.

Only by the yellow eyes was I able to tell that it was the Beast. It was Kaine.

Instead of being relieved, or happy to see him like I'd expected, I was shocked to my core. I knew he lacked complete control when he was in his shifted form, but this was completely different. He looked rabid—deranged.

He was like a wild animal. Every trace of humanity I had always been able to see within those lupine eyes was gone now. Kaine wasn't there anymore.

The Beast approached me with heavy footfalls, rumbling the ground and my bones.

It had been a long time since I was on this side of his sharp teeth. I had to play it smart or else I might end up stuck between them.

He raised his claw at me as he let out a blood-curdling growl.

I was frozen in place. As much as I wanted to move, I couldn't bring myself to. "Are you still in there?"

I was startled by a sudden force that wrapped around my waist and yanked me away from the attack. I looked up to see it was Berrok responsible for it.

He pulled out his crossbow with his other hand, about to shoot an arrow at Kaine.

"No!" I shoved his crossbow out of his hand, and the bolt went flying into a tree.

"Dammit, Sophia! Why did you do that?" He reprimanded me as he all but dragged me away from Kaine.

"You can't kill him!" Tears burst from my eyes as I said it.

Sharra jumped in and was able to use her strength to put up a decent fight just long enough for us to escape. After watching Sharra be thrown by the Beast as if she weighed nothing, I knew that running wasn't going to be an option.

"Wait!" I wiggled free of Berrok's grasp and landed on the forest floor on all fours. "We can't run. We have to fight."

"That would have been a great epiphany to have before you made me drop my crossbow," he muttered through gritted teeth as he stopped where I landed.

"We aren't going to kill him either." I rolled my eyes and got to my feet before reaching into my pockets. I whispered, "All right, guys. I need your help."

"Who are you talking—?" Berrok looked me up and down in confusion until it hit him.

"Kaine Ulric!" I screamed his name, only to be met with the dark and vicious gaze of the Beast.

A sharp stab of disappointment punctured my chest when that didn't seem to get through to him. Part of me had hoped that the moment I'd called his name, he would come back to me...

The next few seconds were a blur.

Kaine began charging at us, taking no time at all to diminish the distance. I flung the Fae into the air around me and ducked.

Kaine's sights shifted from me to Berrok as he lunged, but rays of light emitted brightly from the Light Fae as they set up a force field around us.

The instant the Beast's claw came down on the shield, he was thrown back a hundred feet by the emission of power.

My heart wrenched in my chest as I watched him hit the ground with a heavy thud.

"Kaine!" I called out to him.

He slowly got back up to his feet, looked back at me, and then simply turned around and disappeared.

"Kaine..." Briefly, I allowed myself to feel the full weight of the agony. This wasn't at all what I thought would happen. "What happened to him? Why is he like that?"

The warmth of the force field diminished, leaving me sitting in the cold darkness, staring at the empty space Kaine had just been standing.

"Sophia," Blue Eyes began, approaching me hesitantly, but I was inconsolable. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you. We didn't want to distract you from your journey."

"Distract me?" I laughed humorlessly. "You should have told me Kaine was like this the moment you first saw me."

"All is not lost, Sophia. He hasn't fully succumbed to the power of the Dark Fae just yet. We needed to make sure that you remained focused—for everyone's sake," she said earnestly, begging me to understand.

"I see you clearly now for what you are. You use people for your own gain. I trusted you to tell me everything so that I could be fully prepared when I came here, but instead, you lied to me. As far as I'm concerned, you're just as bad as the rest of the Fae." I pushed myself to my feet and marched away from them.

Sharra and Berrok quickly followed behind me.



We found ourselves nestled in a once lush valley. I could almost picture the rolling hills covered in flowing grass and wildflowers that used to be here.

“Let’s set up camp here for the night.” I was completely devoid of emotion as I spoke. In fact, it was the only thing that I had said in the last three hours.

The others were either giving me my privacy, or they were too scared to say anything.

“I’m going to go for a walk,” I announced.

“Don’t go too far,” Berrok warned calmly.

I looked back at him to see a kind look of concern on his face. I only offered him a single nod in response.

I didn’t feel any kind of peace until I was far away from the camp. I wanted to be alone, to sort out how I felt about everything that was going on.

Will we ever be able to get back to how we used to be?

It felt like the closer I got to Kaine, the farther I was pulled away.

Soph... My name echoed delicately inside my mind, as if it had been carried on the wind around me.

I snapped my head around, half expecting someone to be standing behind me, but I was alone. I waited for my name to be called again only to be met with silence. “Great. I’m imagining things now.”

I continued walking the mangled path between the trees, marking my path back to the camp by how many twisted mushrooms I passed.

“Sophia.”

This time I heard it as clear as day. I spun around, trying to find the person calling my name.

My eyes caught something moving in the shadows. “Hello?”

The figure stood away from the tree and came toward me, but it wasn't until it stepped out into the late afternoon light that I realized who it was.

I slowly raised my shaking hands over my mouth. “Am I dreaming?”

Kaine looked up at me slowly, clutching his left arm and wincing. “I'm sure if you were really dreaming you could've come up with a much nicer place than this.”

It really is him!

I shook my head and laughed as tears ran down my cheeks. “The place doesn't matter, as long as you're here.”

I started walking toward him, preparing myself to hug him, but he took a step back. “Why did you come back here?”

Feeling a twinge lance through my chest, I dropped my arms and said, “What made you think I'd stay away just because you told me to?”

“I shouldn't be surprised, I suppose,” he sighed tiredly as he lowered himself down onto a large overgrown root. “You never were very good at following orders.”

“Maybe next time you'll give me the option to choose for myself before sending me away.” I balled my fists up at him, trying to contain my anger.

After everything I went through to get back to him, and this is how he treats me?

“I didn't ask you to come back,” he responded to the thought in my head as if I had said it out loud.

“You didn't have to!” I exclaimed so fiercely, Kaine's black eyes widened as he stared at me, my tears streaming down my face for a completely different reason now. “Just forget it.”

I turned my back on him and started walking back toward the others.

“Wait! Don’t leave.” He grunted in pain as he threw himself off of the root and strode over to me. “I’m sorry. My intention is never to hurt you. It’s just too dangerous for you here. You almost died once already... I couldn’t bear it if I lost you, Soph. Knowing you’re alive and safe somewhere in the world is so much better than having you by my side but in danger.”

“This place is just as much a home to me now as it is to you. I’m going to fight for it, whether you allow me to or not,” I said in a tone that left no room for argument, even putting my hands on my hips for emphasis.

He looked at me in bafflement before dropping his face into his hand and laughing exasperatedly. “All right then. From now on, we’ll work together.”

I nodded my head, still angry with him, but the feeling quickly started to fade as he approached me, his dark eyes never leaving mine. He stopped a few inches away from me, and dragged his knuckles along the side of my face, brushing my hair over my ear.

My spine tingled with the longing it had been denied for months.

“You’ve got a bit of sun on your face.” His deep voice almost purred to me as a smirk played in the corner of his mouth. “Adventuring suits you.”

My face flushed with warmth, and I turned away from his hand.

“That’s what you have to say to me after all this time?” I poked fun at him.

The precious moment was torn away from us as he let out a ghastly garble, clutching his side and collapsing to the ground.

I reacted by going down with him, trying to stop him from hitting the ground so hard. “My Gods, Kaine! What is it?”

He looked up at me with sweat on his brow, his eyes strained in pain, though he still managed to force a smile. “That force field was a good idea. If you’re that ruthless against me, I’d hate to see what you’re capable of against your enemies.”

“Very funny,” I snapped at him as I began tearing through my pack for medicine and a clean cloth. “Hold still so I can tend to you.”

“Yes, Soph, you’re the boss.” He stretched out on his back and put his good arm under his head as if to relax. “Do with me what you will.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes at him before peeling back his shirt to see the burns that covered his left side. I opened the pouch with the salve and gently rubbed it over his skin. I tried to stay focused on the injuries, but I couldn’t help noticing the way his muscles flexed everywhere I touched him.

His body was incredible, but I could hardly delight myself in the thought of it in his injured state.

I had to think of something else to distract myself. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.” His eyes of night searched mine with a gentleness that still surprised me.

“How could you just send me away so easily?” After I finished wrapping up his wound, I shifted back and sat a foot away from him. I still felt abandoned by him just thinking about it.

“Easy?” He sat up slowly, clutching his side and holding his breath. “That was one of the hardest things I ever had to do, Soph. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to gather that kind of resolve again.”

“If you would have just told me what was going on, I could have helped you. We could have had so much more time together.” I pressed both hands into my chest as though it was the only way I could think of to keep myself from breaking down.

“Do I appear to you as the kind of man who asks for help?” He tilted his head in an attempt to jest, but it only made me sink further into myself. He let out a long sigh before speaking again. “I need you to know this, Sophia. More than my duty to the forest or my kingdom, it’s to you I would give my life for. I don’t care if that makes me a villainous creature. I live and die by you alone.”

I didn’t know whether to cry or kiss him.

My whole body was at war with itself.

My blood was boiling, but my bones felt like ice had cut right through them.

I dropped my face into my hands, giving in to crying. I felt Kaine’s arms wrap around me as he pulled me into his chest.

It felt as if I hadn’t been home until just this moment. I melted into him completely and drifted off into a darkness we both could occupy.

SOPHIA

*D*ots of sunlight warmed my face as I turned away from my leafy bed to look up at the canopy of trees above me.

It felt as if this was the nicest rest I've had in years.

My whole body was still warm from being held throughout the night.

"Good morn—" I turned my head, only to find that I was alone.

I sat up quickly, looking around me for him, but it only confirmed his absence. I hoped it hadn't been a mere dream last night. I wanted everything he'd said to me to be real.

Oh! I know.

I searched in my bag to find that I only had half the amount of cloth that I'd packed, and a quarter of the salve was missing from the pouch. This gave me some semblance of hope.

"Sophia, why would you wander off so far by yourself? It's dangerous." Berrok came from beyond the trees. Clearly, he had been out searching for me for a while—maybe even the whole night—judging by his disheveled look and tone.

"I'm fine." I stood up and brushed the leaves off of me before collecting my things.

"What were you doing out here?" he asked, looking around suspiciously, as if he could sense someone else had been here with me not too long ago.

“Sleeping. Couldn’t you tell?” I gave him a cheeky smile before walking back to the camp, where I would no doubt get an earful from Sharra.

He could tell I was being purposefully obtuse and dropped the subject with a long weary sigh. He then jogged to catch up with me, and decided to focus on another topic he’d been wondering about instead. “How did you come to know this Beast?”

I looked down at the ground and smiled. Of course, I couldn’t answer that. He would think I was crazy for falling in love with a creature that had imprisoned me for trying to steal a flower from his garden.

Before I could form some vague response to his question, I was distracted by the sudden sensation of jealousy that didn’t stem from my own heart. I looked at Berrok in confusion before looking around me past the trees.

Although I couldn’t see him anywhere, I knew Kaine was watching us from somewhere.

Serves him right for abandoning me. Let him stew for a bit.

As soon as we were in earshot of the camp, I could hear Sharra threatening someone.

I glanced back at Berrok fearfully before running through the thick brush and twisted trees to get to her. “Sharra! What’s wro—”

The air hitched in my lungs the instant I saw who Sharra was threatening.

My heart swelled with joy as his name escaped my mouth on stale air. “Garmilen?”

“Sophia...?” He smiled so widely that all the wrinkles on his face pulled together. “You have no idea how good it is to see you.”

He looked like he’d been through hell and back, but I rushed into his arms, hugging him as tightly as I could. “You’re alive. I’m so glad.”

“I could say the very same about you,” he said, patting my back affectionately.

I pulled away and looked over his shoulder excitedly. “Where is Tieni? Is she nearby?”

He fell silent as his smile faded.

“Is she all right?”

His face became even more sullen, and he could scarcely look me in the eyes anymore. “I wouldn’t be able to answer that truthfully. I have no idea how she is. She’s been trapped in the castle with those Fae monsters since they took it over.”

It took a long moment for the horror of his words to set in. The Fae King had Tieni...

My eyes blurred and burned with the idea that she might not even be alive.

I looked down, wiping away any tears that threatened to escape.

No! I won’t give up hope. She’s tough and resourceful, she wouldn’t let herself go down so easily.

Fear crept into my chest once more, constricting my heart as if it sought to squeeze the life from it, but I refused to allow it to take hold of me again.

My eyes darted up to Garmilen with serious intent. “So tell me then, what’s the plan to get her back?”

SOPHIA

*I*t took us three more days before we reached an area near Ulric Castle.

The land had been contorted to an extent where even chasms were torn into the earth to keep people away from Kaine's kingdom. It was treacherous traversing the few pathways still left that we could take, but after some time we got through the worst.

"Ugh! What is that horrible stench?" Sharra plugged her nose in disgust. Her whole body shivered, revolting against the scent.

"You mean besides that rotten miasma hanging in the air here, too?" Berrok threw his eyes up to the sky to point out the thick cloud of gray that seemed to forever be blocking the sun from directly hitting the earth around here.

"Look, up ahead. There's some sort of swamp that's formed around the castle grounds. That must be what smells so bad." I couldn't deny that the stench was awful, but I couldn't allow it to slow us down. Not while Tieni was in there somewhere.

"I thought you loved water, Sharra?" Berrok joked with her, which she clearly did not appreciate.

"Why don't I throw you in there first, and you tell me how it is?" She gritted her teeth in a poor attempt to play nice as per my request.

"Quiet!" Garmilen cut his hand through the air to silence everyone. "Do you hear that?"

Just as he said it, the ground began to rumble, throwing us all off balance and swiping our feet right from under us. The pathway broke up, and the part I was on began to lean toward the swamp water.

I dug my nails into the earth, hoping that it would be enough to stop me from falling into the mouth of whatever was in that swamp, but it wasn't enough.

My hands slipped for only a moment, and I started to slide off the edge. I looked up, desperately screaming for help.

Berrok pulled out his dagger and slid down to me, grabbing my wrist just in time. He then jammed his dagger between two rocks, which stuck and was now holding both our weight.

I used my other hand to cling to his sleeve for dear life.

"I won't let you go," he grunted down at me, holding me tighter.

A fleeting feeling of relief flashed through me as the ground settled again, and Berrok was able to help me back to my feet.

"Thank you," I said and nodded awkwardly as he pulled his dagger out from the rocks.

"Don't mention it." Even though he was still trying to catch his breath, he flashed one of his charming smiles at me.

"What in the hell was that?" Sharra shouted, having almost fallen into the swamp herself.

"Where's Garmilen?" I spun around in a panic, looking everywhere, but he was gone.

I leaned over the edge of the path to see into the chasm, but it was so opaque I couldn't make out anything all the way down there.

The surface of the swamp just across from us then started bubbling. I looked up just in time to see a thick, black sludge floating to the top of the water and bursting. A stream of that sludge shot up from the bottom of the swamp and into the air as if from a geyser.

I threw myself away from the ledge and fell on my back. I blinked up at the sky in shock. The sun was being eclipsed by the stream of black sludge. It then bowed and leaned over, coming down to crash onto the path in front of us. I couldn't even catch my breath before having to scramble to my feet to get away from it.

The sludge seemed to be growing and forming into some type of humanoid figure. It reached out its arm and sent another stream of sludge spewing at me.

I managed to dodge it, but the thing simply aimed its other hand at me.

“Hey! Over here!” Sharra flung her hand out, sending a wave of water from her palm and into the sludge figure.

It garbled in pain and dissipated slightly, just long enough for me to see that there was something underneath the sludge—or rather, someone!

“Garmilen is in there!” I screamed so loud that my voice turned hoarse. “Don't hurt him.”

Sharra reeled back, canceling her next attack. “What should we do?”

“Well, damn, this is surely going to suck,” Berrok grumbled to himself before turning to Sharra. “When I tell you to, I need you to dump as much water on us as possible.”

“Us?” I reiterated right before he bolted at the sludge figure that had taken possession of Garmilen, who was too focused on Berrok to notice Sharra charging up her attack.

The figure dug his hands into Berrok's back, causing him to scream out in pain.

Sharra took off in a sprint and leaped clean over both of their heads, sending a powerful stream of water over both of them. By the time she landed on the other side of them, Garmilen's head and half of his body were free of any sludge.

He gasped for air, choking and spitting out a mouthful of water. He pulled his hands away from Berrok, revealing the

true extent of the damage the sludge had caused to the hunter's back.

There were two gaping wounds in his back as if he had been stabbed.

Garmilen was able to break free from the rest of the sludge after Sharra had washed away the majority of it. He pushed Berrok away from him and both men collapsed to their knees.

I rushed to their aid. "Are you guys okay?"

Berrok managed a small smile through his pain. "Never better."

Garmilen motioned me away. "Please, help him. I'm fine."

I turned to Berrok and couldn't help gasping when I saw how much he was bleeding out. "Oh, Gods."

"It's not that bad, is it?" he asked even as he was coughing up blood.

Panic sunk its talons into me. Immobilizing terror stemming from the pit of my stomach all the way to the ends of my fingertips, froze me in place.

I didn't have anything here that could help him, for no amount of medicine was going to stop his internal bleeding. All I could think to do was place my hands over the wounds on his back to try and stop them from gushing out blood.

"Talk to me, Sophia. Your silence is worrying me." Berrok was clearly trying to remain calm, despite knowing that the situation was dire.

"I don't know if I can—" My throat tightened. I didn't know what to tell him—I couldn't tell him.

"Sophia," Sharra whispered in shock.

I looked over my shoulder at what she was trying to draw my attention to, only to see a golden deer walking up beside me. It looked at me, lowering its head slightly.

"It's you," was all I could think to say.

Then it turned its attention to Berrok's back. The deer tapped her nose into the back of my one hand still trying to staunch the bleeding. A warm light emanated from its touch there, and it was almost as if the light then moved through my whole body, and escaped by radiating out of both my palms.

I could feel Berrok's skin moving underneath my hands, but I dared not remove them to see. I remained stock still, watching my hands with bated breath.

The light disappeared when the deer moved her nose away from my hand again. She looked back at me, bowed her head fully, and bounded away, returning to the forest.

I removed my hands to see that the wounds were completely gone. There wasn't even a single scar or indication that he'd been injured just a moment ago. There were two other scars on his back though, but they were old and had happened at another time.

"The wounds ... they're gone," I declared in disbelief, unable to rationalize how it was possible, only glad that his life wasn't fading away through my fingers anymore.

Sharra and Garmilen both rushed over to check.

"Are you some kind of Druid?" Berrok asked, turning around to face me, both of us still kneeling on the ground.

"Move slowly. You've still lost a lot of blood," I warned as I pressed my hand into his chest to stop him from whirling around like it seemed he wanted to. "Maybe you should rather lie down for a while."

He looked down at my hand and then back up at me, and something about the glimmer in his eyes made me feel embarrassed.

I retracted my hand into my other one, rubbing them awkwardly against each other.

"We can't stop here. I feel fine to keep moving. Besides, we're so close to the castle now. Don't you want to save this Tieni person?" he reminded, a calmness to his voice that persuaded me easily.

“You’re right. Let’s keep moving.”

SOPHIA

The injury didn't seem to slow Berrok down one bit.
It's almost inhuman.

The thought lingered longer than I meant it to, but I found myself watching him carefully the whole time, trying to analyze him further.

Had we been traveling with yet another creature?

Sharra leaned into me and said with a snarky yet playful tone, "You're staring pretty hard for someone who's supposed to be in love with someone else."

"Sharra, have you noticed anything strange about our curious new friend?" I asked, ignoring her elbow poking into my side

"Strange as in?"

I threw a glance at Berrok's back and lowered my voice in case he was able to pick up on our conversation. "I don't know exactly, but for someone who was bleeding out only an hour ago, he seems to be fine—more than fine actually."

"That is strange, but I did watch a deer heal him. So there's that."

Admittedly, she had a point. I tried to let it go, to redirect my mental energy to the task at hand, but the thought continued to eat away at me.

"The front is guarded by trolls and Dark Fae minions. There isn't any hope of infiltrating that way, but there is a back

door that goes through the dungeons,” Garmilen explained while glancing at me. The others didn’t know what that glance meant.

A chill ran down my spine as the memories rushed back into my mind—memories I preferred to forget.

He guided us around the perimeter quietly. “There,” he said, pointing to a small wooden door planted over the ground and partly covered by shrubbery. “We should be able to sneak in without anyone seeing us.”

One by one, we moved swiftly to the back of the castle.

Berrok yanked out the overgrown shrubbery while Garmilen pulled a key from his pocket. He inserted it into the heavy padlock, and with a rustic click, it popped open.

“This feels too easy,” I commented.

“Thank the Goddess for the easy parts, because the rest of it will not be so simple.” Garmilen looked at me with concern in his eyes, an emotion I wasn’t familiar with on his face. He just always seemed so cool and collected, indifferent almost.

We peeled the door open, and its hinges made a loud crack after not being opened for probably decades.

“Everyone, in, quickly!” Garmilen all but shoved us down the stone steps so that he could close the door, which plunged us into darkness.

“I can’t see anything,” Sharra whispered in a panic while shoving against me.

“Oh, yeah. Freak out more. That’ll *really* help us right now,” Berrok retorted sarcastically.

“I should have killed you when I had the chance,” Sharra bit back.

“You never had a chance,” Berrok managed to get the last word in before Garmilen got fed up.

“Quiet, the both of you! It’s like traveling with children. I tell you. Just follow me.” His voice faded before us as he guided us through the pitch-black hallway.

That's right. Garmilen is a shifter as well—or was until the Dark Fae cursed them. He can probably still see better in the dark than any of us.

As I ran my fingers along the wet stone wall, I recalled the days and nights I spent down here, breathing in this sickening musk and decay.

I tried to shove the memory of it back down into the dark recess of my mind, but as the smell became more pungent, it became increasingly difficult to ignore.

My only distraction was a bright green light all the way down at the end of the hall. And strangely enough, it was coming from one of the cells.

“Hello? Is someone there?” a delicate cry came from one of the other cells. “Please, help us.”

This triggered a symphony of cries for help ringing out from all over the dungeon.

“Gods... There must be hundreds in here,” I whispered in horror.

We approached the cell with the glowing green light to find that it was a forest nymph with glowing moss on her body. She appeared to be deteriorating though.

I looked around me, a large stone stuck in my throat, but still managed to say, “We need to get everyone out of here. Garmilen, do you have keys to the cells?”

“I can get them open.” He was quick to respond.

“Good. Berrok, find a way to bar the door. We don't want any surprise visitors. Sharra, come with me. We need to get some more light in here.” I delegated to everyone.

They all looked at each other for a moment before getting right to work.

Sharra and I felt over all the walls, but every torch holder we came across was empty.

“Shame we don't have your little pixie friends here,” Sharra hinted.

Pixie? Oh, the Light Fae.

I took a deep breath and threw my head back. “I’m not mad anymore. You can come out now,” I said into the dark abyss above me.

My voice echoed into nothingness, finding no response.

“We could really use your help.” I threw my hands out before slapping my legs as I brought them back down.

Still, there was only silence.

I closed my eyes and dropped my head, crossing my arms in front of me. “Look, I’m sorry. I know I overreacted. You were only doing what you thought was best.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Sharra laughed.

I opened my eyes and was able to see the black stone surrounding me as the warm orbs of light came closer.

Blue Eyes approached me sheepishly. “We won’t keep anything from you again, Soph.”

“And I’ll try not to get mad at you again,” I smiled at her.

Her face turned pink as a big grin stretched her little face. “Now, what do you need us to do?”

“We could use some light in here,” Sharra interjected.

“Consider it done.” The ethereal voice became lost to the wind as she gathered her sister into a circle and began chanting in a language I didn’t understand.

A canopy of light emitted from their circle and filled the entire room with a soft, sunny glow. It was quite a spectacle, and had we not been in such a dire situation, it would have been enjoyable.

“Sharra?” The lyrical voice of a woman echoed down the halls, causing both Sharra and me to turn around.

The woman who called out to her looked much like Sharra. Only she had short dark hair and light eyes. She covered her mouth as tears escaped her eyes.

“Melia!” Sharra shouted as she rushed past me and into her sister’s arms.

They embraced as if they’d thought they were never going to hold one another again.

“Sophia, all the cells have been opened,” Garmilen reported, wasting no time.

Every man, woman, and creature that had been imprisoned down here surrounded us, looking for help or answers.

I wasn’t sure if I would be able to give them either, but I could offer them one thing that was sorely lacking around here... Hope. “You are free to leave quietly through the back door. I won’t make you stay, but know that the world out there isn’t how you left it. The Dark Fae have taken over the forest and are corrupting the world around it. Some of us are going to stay behind and try to take back this kingdom so that we can restore balance to the forest. If you decide to stay, it means that you will be fighting, but you will be fighting for your land and your people. The forest must be protected from those that will harm it. Will you stand with us?”

I had hoped to see more people moved, but everyone’s expressions were a mixture of fear and reluctance. I stepped aside as many of the creatures began making their way out of the dungeon.

Sharra looked at me and hung her head as she held onto her sister. “I told you from the beginning that all I want is to get my sister back.”

I had to press my lips together to prevent myself from crying. I had thought, out of everyone, Sharra would be the one to want to stay and fight for what’s right. I could only hang my head, unwilling to watch her leave. I looked back at who was left and found only Garmilen, Berrok, and the Light Fae looking at me.

Berrok noticed the distress on my face and tried to reach out to me, but I moved my arm away.

“Let’s keep moving,” I said, my tone cold and detached.

We made our way to the dungeon entrance. The hunter carefully removed the blockade and we quietly slipped out into the hallway.

I did a double take at the startling sight before me. The walls oozed the same black sludge from the swamp earlier, and the stones as far as I could see seemed to be deteriorating and rotting away like the forest outside.

The Dark Fae weren't going to be satisfied until they had corrupted and destroyed everything.

As we made our way down the hallway, I was reminded how I was all too familiar with this route, having tried to escape from the dungeon before. Like I knew not to go right because it would lead right out into the foyer. The left would lead into the main dining hall and the garden.

"The objective is to run them out of the castle," I whispered while keeping a look and ear out for anything approaching. "We have to make it so that they can't stay."

"What do you suggest we do?" Blue Eyes asked, concern edging her little voice.

"Nothing says get out like a house fire." I tilted my head to the side.

"You can't be serious," Berrok chimed in nervously, but with an undertone of anticipation.

"What other choice do we have? Even with our combined forces, we're no match for even one of them. This is the only way I can think of to go about this."

"All right then. Let's do it," Berrok said, shaking his head and throwing caution to the wind with a smile. "What's the plan?"

"If we have the Light Fae create Fae Fire, that seems to hurt the Dark Fae more and will send them into a panic. But before we do any of that, we'll need to scope out the area and find where they tend to congregate. That will be the place we have to hit the hardest." I caught Garmilen smiling at me as I spoke. "What?"

Smiling proudly, he said, “I was just thinking how Kaine could have used that strategic mind of yours on the battlefield.”

“Make sure you let him know that. Maybe next time he’ll think twice about shipping me off to another land in times of trouble.” I smiled back at him before we heard footsteps coming down the hall.

We quickly shuffled into a room beside us right before a giant troll came stomping around the corner.

Berrok leaned over me and whispered, “I should tell you that I’m well-equipped to fight trolls if need be.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” I couldn’t help but shiver at the images in my mind of him being squashed under the big, ugly foot of that thing. “Seems like the troll came from the foyer. We’ll need to go scope it out over there without being seen.”

“I might be able to offer a solution there.” Garmilen padded deeper into the room until he reached the fireplace.

I realized that we were hiding in a drawing room.

It is strange how much of this castle I still haven’t seen.

“Here we are.” Garmilen kept his voice low despite being excited. He pushed down on the crest in the middle of the fireplace, and the back of it opened up.

I approached the opening with amazement. “A servant’s corridor.”

“It pays to be a servant,” he shrugged, and I wasn’t sure if he was joking or not.

I stepped behind the pit into the fireplace, which was big enough to be a doorway as it was. “Garmilen, Berrok, come with me. Everyone else, just stay here for now.”

Garmilen followed behind me, with Berrok bringing up the rear.

We shimmied quite a ways down in the darkness until I passed a little grate that gave me a clear view of the foyer.

I slapped my palm over my mouth to muffle my gasp. The entire foyer, from the doorway all the way to the grand staircase, was covered in black vines and moss. But that wasn't what had horrified me so. Seemingly all of the Dark Fae were in this one area, entertaining themselves with more prisoners.

I was so enraged, I could barely control my breathing.

Not only were they desecrating Kaine's castle, his home—and a place that had become my home, too—they were abusing the creatures of the forest like it was some big joke.

Shaking with fury as I watched them, I'd never wished for anything more than for the power to end them all right here and now. I had never wanted to intentionally hurt another being like I wanted to make the Dark Fae suffer in this moment.

I looked around the room and found Tieni standing right next to the hooded figure, the Fae King.

She's alive... I sighed in relief, but my chest constricted again when I saw how thin and weak Tieni had gotten. Her cheeks were sucked in, and it looked like she was struggling just to remain standing upright.

There was a line of prisoners against the far wall ranging from small creatures to—

Everything stopped for a moment.

I couldn't move.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

“Have mercy,” I breathed, my lips quivering.

It's Lexi.

I'd thought she had returned home after the hunting season ended!

“Sophia, what's wrong?” Berrok noticed my shaking.

“That girl over there... She’s my best friend,” I said while trying to contain my sobs, but I was falling apart. “Why would they take a human?”

Everything about this is so wrong! How can they just get away with this?

Two hands grabbed either side of my face and pulled my eyes away from the grate.

“Don’t lose your head now.” It was Berrok who was holding my face with such ferocity. “We need you. She needs you to stay strong. We’ll get her out of here. I swear to you.”

I nodded slowly, collecting the shattered pieces of myself once more.

He was right. There was nothing more important than keeping a level head right now.

Everything went completely quiet around us. It was as if a thick blanket had just been thrown over the entire castle.

Something’s coming, I just finished thinking when the huge front doors slammed open against the stone walls.

I sucked in a small, painful gasp as my lungs tightened. It felt like my life was being squeezed out of me. Keeping a level head was out of the question for me now.

Kaine walked in hunched over and half-mad, dragging a beaten and barely conscious minotaur into the room. His clothes, or what was left of them, were covered in blood.

But the worst part was the absolute disconnect in those wild eyes. His usual hard-hearted but wise look was gone. There was nothing of Kaine left behind them—only an insatiable hunger for violence.

A fearful shiver ran through me.

Am I too late?

“There you are, my pet. I see you’ve brought me another trophy from the forest.” The Fae King waved his hand nonchalantly, laughing sinisterly. “My, my, how the mighty have fallen. You went from nearly killing me on the battlefield

to serving me. How does it feel to live lower than the dirt under my foot?”

Kaine’s face was unwavering, but deep down, there was rage boiling within him. I could feel how it matched my own.

“We have to do something,” I pleaded, pushing and pulling against the grate in something of a desperate daze.

Garmilen grabbed my arm firmly and pulled me back. “We can save everyone here, including the Alpha King, but we can only do that if we utilize the only advantage we have over the Dark Fae, and that is the element of surprise.”

He was asking me to wait. He expected me to sink my feet into this cement floor and simply watch as this abuse against Kaine continued.

I hated it. With every fiber of my being, I wanted to punch a hole through this wall and run into Kaine’s arms—even if that ended up being the dumbest thing ever.

The helplessness churned my stomach and invaded my bones, sinking me into a darkness that had always existed in my heart. A darkness that’d been growing and expanding with each horrible thing I was made to endure.

“It looks like our best bet is to have the fire start there.” Berrok pointed to the ceiling where a huge antique chandelier hung.

“We can send a few of the Light Fae to strike it, coming in through the hole in the roof,” Garmilen added.

As they spoke, I couldn’t help but recall the very first time I’d walked through the foyer. The hole in the ceiling had let snow drift gently down into a soft white pile on the floor. I recalled how the light from the full moon had set it to glowing. The intricate woodwork everywhere, and the grand staircase half-collapsed, it all flashed through my mind.

I remembered how it had all felt so ominous to me back then. Now, however, everything about this place was precious to me.

The realization that we were going to possibly burn all of it to the ground had only just hit me. How much of the castle was going to survive?

“Come, we cannot delay any longer.” Berrok urged us to return to the fireplace.

My eyes lingered on Kaine as he stood in the middle of the front hall, as still as a statue, hanging his head.

I pressed my hand against the grate. *I'm going to save you from this. I won't let them have you. You're mine.*

I swallowed the lump in my throat and slipped my hand down from the grate, about to turn back, but Kaine's eyes flashed up to me.

It was hard to tell from so far away, but I could have sworn that piercing gaze was looking right into my soul. It was confirmation enough for me.

I nodded my head slowly and left the grate, traveling back through the dark, damp corridor. When I exited the fireplace, everyone's eyes were on me.

I couldn't tell if they were looking to me for guidance or checking to see if I had the strength to continue. Either way, I wasn't about to let them down.

“It looks like the foyer is the place we need to strike,” I said, relieved to hear that my voice sounded strong and determined. “If we can manage to get the Fae King to flee, the rest of his minions are sure to follow.”

K A I N E

The floor was ice against my bare feet.

The blood splattered all over me had coagulated, making my clothes stick to my skin.

I tried to focus on every fine detail of my body in an attempt to regain control, but being this close to the Fae King made thinking clearly damn near impossible. I looked up at him with rage and disgust.

His putrid, slimy black teeth flashed to me in a venomous grin. He had already won; that was what he thought. But I wouldn't be too sure about that.

I trusted that the remaining shifters were going to be able to succeed where I had failed, and Sophia—for a human, she was tenacious as hell. I had faith in her as well. But the thought of her in danger terrified me more than anything ever had.

Without warning, I am struck down by a gut-wrenching pain in the pit of my stomach. The intensity of it caused me to fall to the ground, feeling as if my bones were going to snap if I didn't.

I clenched my teeth, only allowing a constrained groan of defiance to escape through them—instead of the scream of pain and hopelessness behind it.

He was about to take over again. And like always, I knew he'd win the fight for dominance over my will in the next few seconds, but I'd be damned if I was going to make it easy for him.

There's no use in fighting me, boy, the Fae King's hateful voice slithered through my mind. I will continue to use you until there is nothing left of your sanity. It's not a question of if, but when."

Keep dreaming you fucking bastard, I growled back at him, even though the conviction backing it up had been fading lately. With every horrible thing I was forced to do there was no denying it; piece by piece, I was losing myself.

Such a shame. I always thought dogs were easy to train.

Then my mind went black as if someone had turned out the lights.

No matter. You will fail, nonetheless, he sneered.

Horrible images of what was to come fluttered into my head unbidden. Nothing I did could keep them out.

He showed me Sophia's suffering at his hands, but with his voice twisted into that of Lilliana's.

You can't protect her. You couldn't even protect me, she accused. *You're weak and aren't worthy of being the Alpha King any more than you were worthy of being my mate...*

The images began to change to the past. I was shown how I'd treated Sophia when I had first imprisoned her here.

How could anyone love a monster like you? Lilliana's voice kept tormenting me. *She will cast you aside for someone normal ... someone more worthy of her.*

My first thought flitted to that young man Sophia had been traveling with. My body flooded with a raging fire as vast as the ocean itself.

See? You already know the truth, don't you?

"She's mine! No one else can have her!" I felt the words rip from my throat as I fought against the Fae King's influence.

But then a familiar voice emerged from the back of my mind. *Kaine!*

It was Sophia.

How was she calling to me? Was she near?

Delight and terror erupted from my heart simultaneously. Wherever she was, she needed me. I could feel her horror and grief as if it were my own.

I trudged through the horrible images still flashing in my head, letting that little voice lead me toward clarity.

She's in trouble. I have to get back to her!

As the clouds before my eyes cleared, I saw the horror of my actions as clear as day. I was clutching the material of Sophia's rough shirt, and her feet were barely touching the ground.

I blinked a few times as if I could wish this to be a dream. I dropped her instantly and backed away, looking around me.

The whole room was set ablaze by blue flames. Fae Fire. But the Dark Fae minions still refused to run outside and leave their master's side.

The heat licked against my skin as I found Sophia again. She was watching me with uncertainty dancing in her wide green eyes.

"Soph—" I began to say before I was interrupted by that blond boy.

He jumped in front of Sophia protectively, drawing his broadsword and shifting into a stance I'd seen before.

He's a creature hunter!

And by the way he was pointing his weapon at me, not to mention the sharp edge of confidence in his eyes, he was preparing to kill me—just as he had likely done with so many others of my kind.

What was Sophia thinking, bringing someone like this into my castle?

My claws ripped through my fingertips as I snarled at him threateningly, but he remained rooted to the spot, matching his glare to mine. The urge to cut him down and tear him limb from limb was overwhelming.

“Sophia, get away from here!” he shouted to her.

She was quivering on the floor behind him, but only until he spoke to her. She brought herself to her feet, her eyes suddenly determined and unafraid as they looked right at me.

“Kaine,” she said calmly, her voice a sweet symphony in my ears. And just like that, she was drawing me back to land after I’d been washed away by a strong tide.

My claws retracted back into my hand as I huffed a long breath through my nose, willing my blood to cool down to a point where I felt less inclined to shred the hunter’s face off. A face that now looked shocked and uncertain as he glanced from me to Sophia.

I strode up to him and used my hand not to draw blood but to shove him out of my path to get to Sophia instead. I wrapped my arms around her, breathing in her scent and trying to drown out the commotion around me.

“Has it really been so long since I’ve held you? It feels like it’s been years.”

She let out a small, breathy laugh as she shook her head. “Not at all. It hasn’t been so long... And it won’t be that much longer if—”

Before she could finish what she wanted to say, Sophia crumbled in my arms. She screamed in my ear and collapsed against my chest.

I held her full weight as I searched her face. *What the hell is happening?*

She looked up at me with tears in her eyes while clutching at her chest. Her heart...

SOPHIA

*M*y heart was on fire.

Digging my nails into my chest was the only way I could think of to try and handle the agony.

This had to be happening because I was so close to the Fae King.

I remembered the story my father had told me about what'd happened when I was still a newborn. *What did that monster do to me?*

“Sophia, stay with me.” Kaine’s growl and pleading eyes were the only things grounding me.

“Soph!” Lexi ran to my side, nearly shoving Kaine away from me. “What’s wrong?”

She was trembling and weak, but still held me with strength she didn’t have as Kaine helped her to lower me to the ground.

She propped my head up into her lap before looking up at him. “I’ve got her.”

Kaine nodded sternly before setting his sights on the Fae King. His voice was rigid and unforgiving. “This ends here.”

He fell over, clawing at the ground as his body began to change. His bones snapped. His face changed. Black fur began to sprout out from his skin as his clothes ripped from his body.

“You wish to challenge me? You should know by now that this isn’t going to end well for you,” the Fae King laughed as

he stood up from his throne made of carnage. He approached Kaine with slow, determined steps.

Kaine didn't waver, but he was clearly in a lot of pain.

I looked around at the fire engulfing the room. The other Dark Fae weren't fleeing like we'd hoped. There were far too many of them for our small group to take on. And as much as I wanted to believe that Kaine had the ability to win against the Fae King, our chances were slim.

Through the torturous pangs ricocheting around inside my chest, my heart about to burst at any moment, my fingertips pressed into Lexi's arm. I was going to protect her for as long as I could.

Kaine let out a roar of frustration when he was stopped mid-swing by the mere twist of the Fae King's spindly fingers.

"You will *obey!*" He took a step closer to Kaine and dragged his long black nail down the side of Kaine's face, cutting deep.

"Stop it!" I cried out.

The Fae King snapped his head in my direction, his inhuman gaze chilling me to my very soul. Lexi held me tighter, as if to shield me from him.

"You will watch as I kill everyone you love," he crooned happily, tilting his head at me with a wide, terrible grin. "And the best part of it is that you alone were the one who made all of this possible. *You* are the reason Kaine left his castle. *You* are the reason your little human friend was in the forest. As my little pawn, you were more useful than even I could have predicted."

He was evil incarnate, but he was also right.

Had I known the damage I'd cause, I would never have entered the forest that day... I hung my head in shame, unable to look at either Kaine or Lexi.

"Raise your eyes, child. Witness your little coo failing," he demanded in a less playful tone.

He wanted me to watch him win. He wanted to see me suffer.

“It won’t stop me,” I mumbled the words before I thought it through.

His response was quick like the strike of a viper. “What was that?”

Despite my heart and everything in me complaining, I pushed myself up to my feet. Lexi looked up at me in disbelief. “You will not be allowed to hurt this land or its people any longer. We will keep fighting. We will never yield!”

He was speechless for a moment, but threw his head back and gave in to a hideous open-mouthed laughter soon after.

All his minions chimed in with dramatic enthusiasm, as if their only job was to amplify his mockery.

“Was that supposed to make me tremble in fear?” He shook his head in delight. “Look around you, little girl. You’ve lost.”

My eyes slowly moved around the room. The flames were still burning, eating away at everything else but us. It was as if the fire was unable to cross to the center of the room where we were.

The Light Fae must have been somewhere, keeping them back to protect us, but I couldn’t see where they were.

I tried to conjure up another plan to get us out of here, or give us a leg up in this fight, but my mind was drawing a blank. All I could think about was how much I wanted to be lying in the forest with Kaine, or reading a book in the library upstairs. I craved escaping to simpler times. Times I might never get to experience ever again.

I wasn’t allowed to sink any deeper into my defeat, for an earth-shattering sound banged against the front doors. Even the stones of the castle shook from the great force of it.

Was it the giants we saw standing guard outside? Our hope of escape all but diminished.

That loud knock came again, and the thick wood of one of the doors cracked and bent under the pressure. It didn't look like it would be able to withstand another hit.

I looked at Kaine, meeting his yellow eyes. I had run out of ideas... Out of chances.

I failed you... Just the thought brought tears to my eyes again.

Another bang against the door sent a jolt through my body. The heavy wood then cracked in two and simply splintered apart. The sound of it filled the room, almost drowning out the crackling of the fires.

Wind swept through the foyer, blowing out most of the flames around us. With my heart in my throat, my eyes remained focused on the doorway—expecting the worst. But as the dust and smoke cleared enough, I gasped not in horror, but surprise.

“Charge!” a centaur bellowed before a stampede of creatures rushed into the large room.

I couldn't believe it. I spent the next few seconds trying to remember if I'd hit my head at some point. Surely, I was imagining this.

All the creatures we'd rescued from the dungeon... They've returned with reinforcements from the forest!

They began attacking the Fae King's minions first, and by the looks of it, they were hardly a match for the sheer magnitude of the forest creatures' righteous fury.

I pulled Lexi to her feet and dragged her away from the middle of the room, where the chances were greater of getting caught up in the fray.

“What's happening?” Lexi asked, shuddering at the scene of a centaur rearing and stomping down onto a Dark Fae's head with his hooves.

“I believe we are the ones getting rescued this time,” I reassured her, my small smile at the realization instantly easing her concern.

She leaned her head on my shoulder and hugged me tightly. “I thought I would never see you again... I was so scared. I looked for you in the forest every day. My parents thought I was mad, but I couldn’t give up on you. Then one day, I was blindsided by those monsters and brought here.”

Once her stream of emotions and words was over, I asked, “How long have you been here?”

For how long had she suffered because of me?

She only shook her head and shrugged.

I lowered my head, clutching her hand tightly as I looked around me again. More and more minions fled as the forest nymphs used the elements against them. They lit up the entire room with a green flash so bright, I had to force my eyes closed to not be blinded.

And when a pair of hands that weren’t Lexi’s grabbed me, I wasn’t prepared. I yelped and jerked back as my eyes snapped open.

It was Sharra! The siren was standing before me with an exasperated look on her face. “Are you all right?”

“It was you,” was all I could think of saying. “You brought them back.”

She shrugged her shoulders and looked behind her at the fighting still going on. “I figured somebody had to save your sorry, stubborn butt.” She was trying to be tough, but her hands were trembling. “You sure have a knack for landing yourself in deep shit, Soph.”

I smiled at her even though she had already averted her eyes from me. I threw my arms around her, hugging her tightly. “Thank you for coming back.”

“Yeah, well... I guess there was some truth to what you said.” She finally looked back at me with that unwavering confidence I’d come to know and admire about her. “There would be no home to go back to if we don’t fight for it now. Besides, I couldn’t let that bastard get away with taking one of my sisters,” she added with a smile and quick wink.

“Take a look around, Fae King. Your armies have fled. Your stronghold has crumbled,” Kaine growled as he shifted back to his human form. I still winced hearing the sound of his body morphing. “You’ve been defeated.”

The Fae King only laughed, “Is that what you think? How very stupid you still are, even after a hundred years.”

Kaine didn’t wait around any longer. In two big strides, and in the blink of an eye, he was standing right in front of him. Even the Fae King looked surprised when Kaine plunged his hand straight into his chest without warning.

I’d barely had the chance to come to terms with what I was seeing when he simply *plucked* the Fae King’s black heart out of his chest—like it was the most menial thing he’d ever done. It was beating wildly within Kaine’s grip as the front hall shook with a hair-raising scream.

“This isn’t over, *Alpha King!*” the Fae King spat out, splattering black sludge into Kaine’s face. “Death is only the beginning.”

Not affected in the slightest, Kaine only stood there and started tightening his grip, crushing the Fae King’s heart slowly. Even as he fell to the floor, wailing like a pig being slaughtered alive, Kaine kept going, taking his time—as if he wanted to watch him suffer for as long as possible.

It was brutal to watch, but no one dared stop him. Kaine’s retribution had been a long time coming.

Finally, the screaming stopped, followed by a popping sound as the heart burst within his fist. Some of the forest creatures were retching against the far wall.

Kaine opened his hand as the thing that had once been a heart turned to dust right in front of us, along with the Fae King’s body.

As if on cue, a wind swept through the room, breaking the absolute silence. It blew out the fires, and carried the Fae King’s dust away, leaving no trace of his existence behind. It was like he’d never even been here to begin with. Then as the

wind left the room, it seemed to spread out outside, and took the miasma of decay away along with it.

“He’s gone?” gurgled one of the minions behind me in disbelief.

That sent the rest of them into a panic, all trying to escape either by rushing out of the open doorway or clawing their way out through the ceiling.

Many of the creatures didn’t allow them to leave. They’d been tortured by the Dark Fae here for months after all.

I looked away, allowing them to cut their pound of flesh. I had other things that were far more pressing to worry about, like the fact that Kaine hadn’t moved this entire time.

I walked up to him slowly, taking care not to startle him. “Is it over?”

“For now,” Kaine said in a monotonous voice, still staring at his hand that had killed the Fae King, his mind a million miles away.

Death is only the beginning...

Did those last words get to him?

“Even so, we’ll be celebrating tonight.” He finally lowered his hand to his side and turned to me.

His gentle smile almost made me forget my concern for him. I nodded and weaved my arm into his. As we turned back toward all the creatures in the front hall, everyone began cheering.

Kaine raised his hand, and with that one swift movement, they all fell to attention.

It was at that moment I realized something. I’d thought before all this that everyone listened to him because they were afraid of him. But in truth, they respected him. He was the check and balance system over the raw power this forest held.

I watched him in amazement as he stood unwavering under such pressure.

“The blight has been lifted from the forest. Power’s been restored to the rightful heir. You’ll no longer have to fear for the safety of your homes and families. Tonight, we shall bask in our victory. I welcome all to join in this feast. I’d say you’ve earned it.” He turned to me after he was done speaking and another bout of cheers followed. He smiled when our eyes met, and asked laughingly, “What are you looking at me like that for?”

“You’re just—amazing, you know that?” I blurted out, the words falling from my lips unfiltered. My face flushed with warmth, and I dropped my chin down in embarrassment.

His smile turned into a cheeky smirk. “If you keep looking at me like that, I’ll have no choice but to take you somewhere private and show you just how amazing I can truly be,” he murmured as he leaned in close to me.

My eyes went wide, my heart beating wildly against my ribcage. “W-what?” I said dumbly, but knew exactly what he meant. How could I not when a thousand fluttering butterflies were taking over my stomach?

He gave me a knowing wink before schooling his smile into something less lustful as he turned toward someone who was walking up to him to shake his hand. More followed, and I left him to it.

I wanted to find my other friends to hug and celebrate with. As I looked around the room, I noticed that there were some creatures who were not smiling.

In particular, the centaur that had approached us when we’d entered the forest the other day, was crouching close to the floor and leaning over something.

I approached him slowly to see what was the matter, thinking that he might have gotten hurt, but as I got a clear picture of what he was crouching over, I realized that was not the case.

He was holding another centaur’s lifeless body in his arms.

The Light Fae surrounded him, clearly trying to heal his friend or sibling.

I knelt down next to him, drawing his attention. He reacted by moving the body away from me, as if I was going to take it from him.

I gave him a solemn look before folding my hands together and closing my eyes. “Goddess above. Please hear me. Guide this soul to peace. Let him suffer no more.”

I opened my eyes to see Garmilen walk up with his head hung. “Helene, take him home with you.”

Heavy footsteps came up from behind me, and I immediately knew who they belonged to simply because of the strong aura that always accompanied him. “We will give everyone that perished here a proper burial.”

The centaur nodded slowly before gently laying his friend back down on the floor.

One by one, the Light Fae looked up at us in terror. “Something’s wrong...”

I followed their line of sight to outside the doorway, but couldn’t see what they were looking at. They turned into orbs and ascended through the hole in the ceiling.

Garmilen didn’t miss a beat before running after them. I followed close behind. He led me into another small servant’s corridor, and up a winding staircase.

The staircase ended as we reached a large hatch door. Garmilen grabbed the handle, pressing his arm against the door before shoving it open.

Dust and debris rained down on our heads, and I slapped my hands over my eyes to protect them, but some got into my eyes. As I rubbed at them and tried to blink the grains of sand away, Kaine came up behind me.

“What’s going on?”

“Sire, you might want to come up here.” Garmilen had already climbed up through the hatch when I wasn’t looking.

Clambering after him to get out onto the roof of the castle, the first thing I noticed was the look on his grizzled face. It sent a chill down my spine, only for the feeling to be

exacerbated when I noticed how the Light Fae hovering next to him were hanging their heads.

“Oh, Gods.” There was a dead giant, but next to it lay Blue Eyes, her little body tainted with red. She had to have been fighting him alone up here.

Tears poured from my eyes as I went to kneel down beside her. My heart twisted in my chest at the sight of her shallow breathing.

I knew the sight of death being near all too well. Living on a farm and being poor, there had been many winters when we hadn't enough grain for the animals. I'd also seen people go the same way.

She blinked up at me calmly, as if she had already accepted her fate. But I haven't.

“Is there nothing we can do? What about the Fae Flower? Can't we save her with it?” I panicked, trying to prevent what I knew was about to happen.

The other Fae looked away from me without uttering a word.

“We can't give up. We have to—” My words were choked off by the sobs I couldn't keep at bay any longer.

I wiped my eyes with the backs of my hands as my entire body revolted against the knowledge that she was going to die because of me. I'd told her to come up here. It had been my plan. I was the one who had condemned her to this fate!

“Dear Sophia.” That small, ethereal voice called to me, waving for me to come closer. She was struggling to speak, so I leaned in closer so she didn't have to work so hard to make me hear her. “Do not weep for me. I'm made of magic. I cannot die. Not really.”

“I'm sorry. If I hadn't—”

“The forest is safe. Power has been restored to the rightful king. You think you're just a weak human, but you're wrong. You are so much more than that.” Her fighting against her

weakness and pain just to give me a frail smile was even more gut-wrenching to watch.

She then beckoned me even closer. The rough stone bit into my palms as I leaned down lower. The closer I came to her, the clearer the faint buzzing of the aura of magic that encompassed her became.

“My name is Theodosia,” she whispered, and the other Light Fae gasped behind me.

I sat up quickly, wondering what was wrong. They were squabbling with each other and panicking about something.

“I am going to pass on now, sisters. Thank you for being by my side. Andromeda, take care of Sophia. You are ready.” The one with short blonde hair, who had to be Andromeda, nodded her head somberly.

After all this time, it feels strange that I am only learning their names now.

“Helene was good to me. She gave me so much to love in this life. May she guide me amongst the stars from now on...” Theodosia’s voice faded as she looked up at the sky.

The cloudy gray overhang parted, allowing the sun’s rays to break through and light up her face. Her form began to wither away as the light of her magic and the light of the sun became one. It was as if all of her had become light itself.

The Light Fae came together, forming a circle just out of earshot of Garmilen, Kaine, and myself.

I tried not to intrude, even though it appeared like they were talking about me.

Then one turned to face me, but it wasn’t Andromeda. “Dear Sophia, my name is Edith. If you should ever need anything, just call out my name, and I will be there.” Then she set her gaze on Kaine and dropped her head in a bow. “I know it is disgraceful to turn down the invitation of a king, but we would like tonight to mourn. A feast of celebration would be too difficult to get through right now.”

“Think nothing of it. I’m sorry for your loss.” Kaine lowered his head out of respect.

It warmed my heart to see such a gentle side of him. It was like he was becoming more human—or at least becoming less Beast.

“You have sacrificed a great deal for the greater good as well, My King.” Edith clasped her hands in front of her chest and tilted her head as if she was praying to him.

Kaine had lost his mate, his heir, and most of his kind.

“Heavy is the head that wears the crown,” as they say.

White lights surged from their chests until they turned into orbs again, and quickly took off, vanishing into the blinding light of the sun.

As I shaded my eyes with my hand against the glare, I wondered where the Light Fae went when they weren’t here. Did they have their own kingdom of Fae somewhere?

“Incredible,” Garmilen uttered to himself.

I turned, giving him an inquisitive look.

“Apologies. I am just truly floored at what just transpired,” he said, brushing his hand over his hair which was already smoothed back. It glimmered in the late afternoon sun as he turned to me and smiled. “You don’t even know how deeply they’ve honored you, do you?”

Kaine took pity on me, seeing the deepening confusion on my face. “A Fae’s power is in their name. If you know a Fae’s name you can command their power. I’ve known thousands of Fae in my lifetime, but I’ve never been told the name of a single one.”

Right behind my shock and incredulity, it felt as if sunshine was beaming right from my soul. A smile spread across my face as it peeled away all the other bad feelings that had been trying to claw their way out of me this whole time.

“Well, I’m glad that they trust me enough to tell me,” I said and looked toward the sun.

“Indeed,” Kaine murmured as he reached down to stroke my hair back from my face with a gentle hand. “You’re going to make a fine queen someday.”

The smile fell from my face.

As if a cold bucket of water was thrown over me, I inhaled so sharply that my lungs were struck with a sharp pain as my whole spine shivered and my body stiffened.

QUEEN?

SOPHIA

*M*usic filled the air around me, flooding me with its sweet melody.

The wine flushed out any worry in my mind and soreness in my body.

The dining hall was alive with chattering creatures celebrating joyously.

They deserved this. We deserved this.

I lifted the glass to my lips and allowed the lukewarm red liquid to slip over my tongue like a satin sheet. As I leaned my head back, my eyes wandered around the room that was still overtaken by vines and dead moss.

If it were any other place, I might have thought the overgrown shrubbery was charming—turning abandonment and neglect into something that could still be beautiful. But not here.

This was not a place where that was welcomed, for this place wasn't ready to give up, and neither was I. It deserved to be fought for.

When I'd first stepped foot in this castle, I couldn't possibly have known what it would become to me, and so many others. Though the stones sat silent and unmoved for centuries, power coursed through every single one of them.

Ulric Castle was a living, breathing entity. I understood this now better than I ever could've before.

My eyes dropped down once more, stretching across the long table and catching Kaine's gaze.

He sat unbothered by the merriment with his leg slung over the arm of the chair, and his fingers pressed over his mouth as he watched silently. Judging by the way he was looking at me, he must have been waiting for me to look at him for a while.

I raised my glass to him with a smile, but he only tilted his head with an unreadable expression.

Then he stood up and quietly left the room. It took me a moment to realize that he'd motioned for me to follow him.

My eyes scanned the room as if I was going to get in trouble for doing so, but as I got up and crossed the room as well, no one really seemed to pay my exit any mind either.

Butterflies fluttered in the pit of my stomach as I followed Kaine down a long hallway. He was so far down it already that he looked like a mere shadow as he turned the corner and disappeared.

I briefly wondered if he was playing a prank on me. He truly didn't seem like the type to get a thrill from such cheap scaring tactics, but why else was he being so secretive?

"Kaine?" I turned the corner, only to find that he was gone.

I continued on despite being unsure of where I was going. I walked by instinct alone until I found a spiral staircase that was far grander than the one we'd taken to the roof, but nowhere near as impressive as the grand staircase in the foyer.

Well, what was left of it now after the fire anyway. I shook my head, as if that could rid me of the guilt.

My foot found the bottom step of the unfamiliar staircase, drawing a long creak from it. I climbed the next steps more carefully as I didn't know the integrity of the wood, and it was difficult to see in the near-complete darkness.

The few candles hanging away from the wall did little to aid my quest, but I held onto the railing and kept going.

I shivered, realizing how cold it'd gotten, as if a huge draft was being let in from somewhere ahead.

But the instant I reached the top of the stairs, I froze. But it had nothing to do with the cold.

Hey, I recognize this hallway!

I completely forgot I was still following Kaine. Instead, I dashed down the corridor until I reached the room I missed the most out of all of them. My hand curved around the brass knob, and I flung the door open with wild disregard.

The smell of old books deeply filled my lungs as I basked in my safe haven.

“How I’ve missed you, Library!” I exclaimed before I set eyes on Kaine who was leaning against the table waiting for me.

He smirked as he stalked over to me with that delicious darkness I had become familiar with in my dreams. “I must say, I’m rather impressed at how quickly you found me. There is something to be said about the bond that mates share.”

“Why did we leave the party?” My face flushed easily, and I tried to look anywhere else around the room except at him.

“I got tired of sharing you with the world...” He stopped right in front of me. His chest was so close to my face that the scent of warm vanilla and burned redwood assaulted my senses, disarming me.

It felt like fireworks were going off inside my body, one by one, starting from my toes and spreading to my chest.

He reached behind me and pushed the door shut so that we were well and truly alone. With the clicking of the lock into the door frame, I was melting as I became utterly engulfed in his darkness.

“You have no idea how much time I’ve spent thinking about this very moment,” he breathed down to me as his fingers grazed my cheek, tantalizing my unprepared skin. “I wasn’t sure I was ever going to see you again. The fact that

I'm here standing in front of you right now is nothing short of a damn miracle.”

A quiver tingled at the base of my spine, and spread like wildfire through the rest of me. My thighs pressed together as I relished the aching that awakened there at his touch.

“Kaine,” I muttered weakly, not knowing what else to say.

His hand wrapped around the back of my neck, pulling me closer to him.

My head leaned back, waiting for whatever he was about to do. I anticipated the feeling of his lips on mine. I craved it.

It had been so long—too long. Without him, my life had felt like a vast ocean raging endlessly with an unforgiving terror. Now that we've made it back to each other, it was calm and I was able to swim to the surface.

As my lips grew cold, my eyes fluttered open to see that he was just staring at me with a lot more patience than I was feeling.

“What is it?” I sighed with a small smile, trying to cover up how disgruntled I actually was.

“Every time I look at you, you become even more unbelievable.” His eyes searched my face as if trying to comprehend the magnitude of his emotions—almost like he never expected to feel them.

My eyes fell on the lace that held the top of his shirt together. Both excitement and trepidation tantalized my fingertips as I reached for it. The knot came undone too willingly.

My fingers roamed shyly over the indent at the base of his neck, right where his collarbones met, before I dragged them down his heated skin, pulling the lace from their holes.

With most of his chest bared to me, I quietly stared at him as I slowly traced a path farther down the hard planes of him. I was so close to him that I could hear him gulp.

It was hard to imagine that I was making a big, beautiful shifter like Kaine nervous, but the thought of having that kind

of power over him made me feel devilish.

“You must have missed the Library very much,” he baited, even as his tenseness brought his voice down an octave, giving it a heavier sound. Everything about it lured me in.

“I did,” I purred, looking up at him through my lashes. “I missed it more than anything.”

“Is that so? You can’t think of a single thing you missed a little more?” A grin spread across his face, pulling on his dimples and enunciating his sharp chin.

I rolled my eyes up to the ceiling and gave him a mischievous smile as I tapped my lips thoughtfully. “No, I can’t say that I can. Why? Did you have something in mind?”

“Such *insolence*,” he growled, flashing his pearly white teeth as he leaned in closer. “Surely, you understand you can’t leave this room until you’ve been punished. How shall it be then?”

My confidence forgotten, I took an involuntary step back, only to be halted by the door before I could even complete that step. With my back pressed flat against the smooth wood, I watched as Kaine closed the distance between us again with a predatory gleam in his dark eyes.

“No escaping now, Miss Everly. You are in the Beast’s grasp forevermore,” he whispered hotly as he dragged his nose along my jaw, stopping underneath my earlobe and breathing me in like a sweet perfume.

“Whoever said I wanted to escape?” I wanted to retort playfully, but the unevenness in my voice gave me away.

His eyes blazed up to mine with a hunger that was all-consuming. “That’s true. You’re the first little bird I’ve ever seen to fly back into her cage.”

“Perhaps you’ve flown back into mine.” I shrugged innocently, though all my blood was rushing to my face.

His arm shot out and wrapped around my waist as he pulled me into him. I felt small and delicate in his embrace, but more importantly, I felt safe.

His other hand moved down my side, gripping and giving my hip a squeeze as he passed by it to get to my thigh. His fingers dug into my soft flesh there as he lifted me.

My arms fell around his neck as I pressed my body to his, feeling his heart beat wildly against mine.

“I will never let you go again. I couldn’t bear it.” His grip on me tightened as if I was going to turn to water and slip through his fingers, but I wasn’t going anywhere. I couldn’t even fathom it.

This was where I belonged. With him.

Kaine carried me over to the long table in the middle of the library, where I’d stored piles and piles of books I was still planning on reading. The table was covered with them, but this didn’t deter him for a second.

He simply swept his arm through those towers of books, sending them crashing to the floor. Gasping in horror, I looked down at the mess he made. I was about to say something, but he stopped me with his mouth. And just like that, I couldn’t remember what I’d been upset about anymore.

My fingers ran through his curly, tousled hair as he set me down onto the tabletop and held me to him even tighter.

“Goddess, help me. You taste like the sun feels ... like life and warmth—sometimes scorching.” His voice quaked along with his body.

I’d never seen Kaine react this way. Then again, we had only been truly intimate within the dreamscape of our minds.

This was the first time it was going to be real...

It took me a moment to get past the shock as the realization settled in.

“Kaine,” I said, trying to get his attention, but his mouth continued its blazing trail down my neck to my collarbone, leaving electrifying little kisses behind wherever he went.

“Mm-hm?” He didn’t seem to have noticed the concern in my voice.

“Well—this is... Well—” I stumbled over my words.

This is completely embarrassing!

He lifted his head to me questioningly, but almost immediately after, a knowing look entered his eyes.

“Don’t worry, my Soph. I would never dream of hurting you.” His words sunk into me through my skin, as if reassuring me of something I already knew. “We can take it as slow as you want to. Even if it takes us all night.”

And now my heart was trying to eject itself from my ribcage! I pressed my hand over my chest in an attempt to calm its stirring.

He gently pushed me down on the table, but moved away for some reason.

I heard him chuckling to himself, and raised my head to see what was going on. I blushed when I saw how amused he was with me. His eyes were roaming my legs up and down while pressing his first knuckle into his lips to hide his smile.

I realized that the moment he’d moved away from me, I’d pressed my knees together. I had never wanted to hide my face as much as I wanted right now.

I was about to tell him I hadn’t meant to make it look like I wasn’t interested in continuing this with him, but he didn’t look the least bit deterred.

Instead, he patiently took hold of both my ankles, his hands like fire as they slowly pulled them apart while he moved them up under my dress. Passing my calf, he took his time as he made his way up to my hips.

His fingers curled around the top of my linen braies beneath my dress, and he pulled them off me just as slowly, his eyes never leaving mine.

I shivered as the chill within the library passed over my heated skin.

“Sophia... You’re so beautiful,” he said softly, tilting his head, and letting his gaze take me in as though he was utterly enamored with the sight of me.

The aching in my core shot up a few notches.

I never could've imagined this from him. He was a king after all... A shifter king who had hated humans when I'd first met him. And now he was looking at me as if he thought I was his Moon Goddess Helene herself.

"Kaine..." His name left my lips as I drowned in a sea of want.

I sat up, pulling him closer to me.

Make me feel real again.

His lips crashed into mine, and I could taste the desire on his tongue. His want for me was palpable as mine was for him.

My hands pressed into his chest and slipped down, relishing the feel of every curve of his muscles before grabbing the bottom hem of his shirt. He pulled away to help me get it over his head.

We were bathed in the light of the moon breaking through the tall floor-to-ceiling windows, while the rest of the room remained dark, giving me a perfect view of his torso. He was gorgeous. Like the most skilled artist in the world had sculpted him.

He leered over me as my eyes explored his bare skin. His dark gaze began to turn yellow with the reflection of the moon bouncing off them.

I watched with bated breath as a single claw extended out from his finger. He then brought that nail closer and dragged it down the front of my dress. It was so sharp that it cut right through effortlessly.

The dress I was wearing wasn't particularly expensive or precious to me, so I wasn't bothered by it. I didn't even care if he cut my skin in the process. I trusted him completely.

He slipped the material off my shoulders, and it fell around my waist.

Unhurriedly, as if giving me time to object, he lowered his head until his mouth found my breast. I gasped and arched my back at the feeling.

It was stronger, more intense, than when we'd been dreaming of being together like this.

My head fell back as I soaked in every reaction my body was having to his mouth and touch.

My heart beat like a fervent drum.

My skin sang like a grand piano.

My core throbbed so much that relief only came when I wiggled my restless hips.

"Isn't the aching torturous?" he growled into my ear as his fingers danced down my torso and slid between my legs.

His other hand pressed into my lower back, keeping me in place as I gasped, but his mouth swallowed it with a hungry kiss. With a moan of abandon, I gave in to him.

His fingers began moving expertly, understanding my body better than I did my own as he drew pangs of pleasure from me.

All I could do was cling to his shoulders and sink further into the pool of aching, seeming to only be getting deeper and deeper with each passing moment with him.

"Sophia... I can barely think straight. I need you," he huffed breathlessly, as if his very life was being drained from him.

"I'm not afraid," I said truthfully, surprised by how out of breath I sounded as well.

His fingers slipped inside me with little resistance, and a very open-mouthed and unexpectedly loud moan expelled from my throat.

I slapped my hand over my mouth in shock, but Kaine pulled it away.

"No. I want to hear you ... every little sound, every little breath. They are all mine," he said, his voice thick and low, and his eyes heavy with something that set fire to my blood. "You're mine."

His fingers left my body too quickly, and I had to keep myself from letting out a sound of complaint as an empty void took their place. “I need to know, Sophia. Are you certain that this is the life you want? We cannot go back after this.”

Shifters mate for life, I remembered.

Was he trying to tell me that we were passing the point of no return—that I was stuck with him after this?

If so, then I didn’t want to waste any more time. I knew from the core of my being that this was where I was meant to be.

Everything I had ever done in my life had led me to this point. To Kaine.

This was my destiny, and I was no longer afraid to reach out and grab it.

“I am yours, My King,” I whispered in an attempt to be flirty, but instead, it sounded as if I was pledging fealty to him. I supposed in a way, I was.

The last thing I saw was his eyes encircled with that bright yellow like he held the moon within them.

Everything else after that was dark.

I felt like I was falling into a void of nothingness.

My mind went blank.

My soul was emptied.

I was a cup preparing to be filled.

A sharp pain pulled me to the surface for a moment. Then the sensation dulled into a soft ache as Kaine filled me slowly, taking care not to hurt me.

My legs wrapped around his hips, pulling him in further.

“Breathe for me, Soph,” Kaine murmured against my ear

I released the air in my lungs, wondering at the back of my mind how long I’d been holding it.

“I will take care of you,” he promised as he lifted me up from the table, causing me to slip down further onto him. His

invasion of me was relentless now, and this time I let the moan out without trying to muffle it.

He pressed me into a bookshelf, knocking over something that shattered to the ground.

What was it? Glass? A lantern?

I couldn't fathom bringing myself out of this void to check. I couldn't care less at this point.

His fingers sunk into my sides like soft dough as his hips moved to a rhythm I was woefully unfamiliar with.

Here I thought he was saving me from drowning... It turns out that he is the one drowning me.

Each time he drove into me, I could feel him exploring deeper, and my body tensing more around him.

"Sophia," he breathed heavily into my neck, his whole body shaking as his movements became more desperate.

His claws were out and he was dragging them down through the wooden shelves and books alike, as if both were nothing more than butter.

I folded my hand in his and sparks passed from his palm to mine. It drew us in like magnets.

All the bones in my body felt like rubber, but my muscles were so tense that they were like steel.

I was holding on to something, but I didn't understand what it was.

I feared if I let go, I would come undone, and that the fabric of the universe would devour my pieces, trapping me within its space of nothingness forever.

But I couldn't deny the pressure building up inside me. It was insatiable, and I knew it wouldn't stop until I was devoured.

So then do it... Devour me!

My nails dug into his back, tugging at his flesh and eliciting a growl from his chest.

My heart was beating so fast that I feared it would give out.

Every inch of my body was alive with an energy I'd never felt before.

"Give in to me, my love," he all but begged but managed to maintain the authority in his voice.

Something in me snapped, and the rest came tumbling down as I was blinded by magnificent lights.

Even my entire body pulsated with these explosions of light, and I didn't care that with each one I was falling deeper into an unknown void.

But it was no longer filled with darkness. It was overflowing with an array of colors I'd never seen or felt before.

"Kaine!"

SOPHIA

I opened my heavy eyes to a dark room, feeling my body sinking into a mattress and silk sheets.

Briefly, I thought I was back in the Prince's castle in Larose Kingdom. But when I raised my head from the pillow and noticed the long window in the far corner had been broken into by a mess of vines and moss, I breathed a sigh of relief.

The next thing I became aware of was another's breathing right behind me. I quickly turned to my other side and found Kaine fast asleep next to me on the bed.

Warmth and happiness flooded my chest. I'd never thought this level of joy was possible to feel.

My tired fingers reached forward, brushing his curls away from his forehead, which stirred him awake.

Without opening his eyes, he grumbled in a low voice, "What are you doing awake? Perhaps I didn't tire you out enough." A playful grin then stretched across his face. "Shall I rectify the matter?"

His arms wrapped around me, pulling me into his chest.

I giggled and melted into his warmth and safety, but said after a few moments, "I was just—scared when I woke up."

His eyes were open now, tracing circles with his fingers on my back as he listened intently.

"I was worried I'd wake up and be somewhere else. I've been waking up in places I don't want to be for so long." My

eyes flashed to the ceiling so the tears that rushed them could roll to the back of my head again.

“Don’t think about it, Soph, not for one second. You’re here with me in my room, and I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

Neither of us wanted to admit what we’d lost in those months when we didn’t have each other. The constant gnawing feeling that something might have happened to the other had been endless. And I could only imagine what it’d done to Kaine, whose mental state had been teetering the line between lucidity and the madness of the Beast.

I needed to change the subject. Dwelling on this wasn’t going to help heal either of us. “So, what does it mean to be the mate of a shifter?”

The question hadn’t sounded half as embarrassing in my mind as it did out loud.

“Well, in theory, shifter mates are bound for eternity. Their flesh becomes one body occupying two spaces. Their hearts beat as one, and their minds share a special link,” he explained in a dotting way, which sounded foreign coming from his lips, but not at all unpleasant.

To think, this gentleness is coming from someone who can turn into a monster with sharp teeth and burning yellow eyes, I thought as I stared up at him.

“Sounds like a gross invasion of my privacy if you ask me,” I said, lifting my chin in mock defiance.

“And you don’t call what I did to you in the Library a gross invasion of your privacy?” he asked, his hand stroking my back going lower and lower as he played along, but clearly he’d already won the game.

I was too flushed to respond to him.

His laughter rumbled in his chest as he said, “It’s true, though. When a shifter falls in love, it is unmitigated and consummate. They can think of nothing else more important than that person. In theory, it’s even powerful enough to break a curse.”

As I thought about his words, Kaine brushed my hair back with his fingers while looking at me as though I was the one who'd created the moon and the stars in the night sky.

"I suppose, in a way, it did. We defeated the Fae King. Surely, that means that both of our curses have ended," I said, hope building up inside me, only to be dashed by his unenthusiastic reaction.

"I do hope you're right about that."



I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept this deeply.

I would have remained in Kaine's bed all day if it hadn't been for the top of a teapot slipping off of a tray and crashing to the floor. I sat up suddenly, looking around in a panic, but relaxed when I saw it was only Tieni.

In all the panic and excitement, I hadn't gotten a chance to really speak with her.

She had lost a significant amount of weight and her face was gaunt from malnutrition, but her smile was still the same.

I hopped out of bed, stopping only to gather my footing before rushing at her with tears tearing their way down my cheeks. "Oh, sweet heavens!"

"Good morning, my dove. I'm so glad to see you again, too."

Ignoring the tray completely, I wrapped my arms around her so fiercely that the tray hit the floor, splashing tea all over the carpet beside the bed.

"Good Goddess, child!" she explained, unsure of how to react at first, but it didn't take her long to return my hug. Her arms tightened around me until I could barely breathe. She was fairly strong for an elderly woman. "I prayed for your safe return. I hope you know."

"I was so worried when you weren't with Garmilen." I could barely speak through my own sobbing.

“You shouldn’t have been,” she said as she pushed me away to get a good look at my face. “It will take a lot more than that monster of a Fae King to get me down.” Her eyes then shifted to the bed behind me before finding my eyes again, her sweet smile growing into a devious grin. “So, you and Kaine?”

This was certainly *not* a conversation I was ready to have with her—not with anyone. My throat tightened, and I pressed my lips against my teeth as I gave her a wry smile instead.

“It looks like you’re back to work already. I was thinking that I’d love to help out with the cleaning around the castle today.” I began ushering her out of the room, talking over her as she tried to press me with more embarrassing questions. “Just give me a moment to get dressed, and I’ll be right out. Thank you!”

At the threshold, she turned around and said sternly, “If he was too rough with you, just let me know and I’ll—

I slammed the door in her face.

Mortified! I was mortified.

I wasn’t even sure I could face Tieni at all again today, especially not if she was going to keep asking me those kinds of questions.

I changed into the sage green dress Tieni had brought me and left the room.

Almost immediately upon exiting, I noticed that Tieni wasn’t the only one cleaning. All of the maids of the castle were at it as well, even though they looked like they could have used a day of rest instead.

A gentle voice came from behind me. “Good morning, my lady. Is there something I can get you?”

I turned to face her, surprised. None of the other servants, besides Tieni and Garmilen, had ever spoken to me before. “Not at all, thank you. I was just wondering why everyone is cleaning today. I figured you all would need at least a few days to recover after everything that had happened.”

Her brunette curls bounced as she dropped her head and pressed her finger over her lips. “While rest might have been appreciated, this is far more important. We must cleanse our home of the filth and sickness left behind by the Dark Fae. The longer it is allowed to remain, the more it seeps into the land. Then, the power of the land becomes forever tainted.”

“I see. In that case, where can I jump in and help?” I asked eagerly, but she didn’t seem too keen on it.

“Oh, you don’t have to,” she said in a rush, waving her hands in front of her in outright refusal. “Believe me when I say you’ve done more than enough for our kind.”

“It’s no bother, really. I wouldn’t feel right sitting around while everyone else cleans.” Much to the young maid’s distress, I began rolling up my sleeves.

“My lady—”

“Just point me in the direction of something to do,” I interjected with a smile, and she finally yielded.

“Very well. Thank you, Sophia. I understand now why Helene sent you.” Her eyes glistened, and her voice quaked as she said it.

I waved my hand at her, shrugging off her words.

“I suppose it will be a great help if all the windows in the castle are opened, if you’d like to take on the task? Most of the bad energy can be vented out that way.” She folded her hands in front of her, resuming her professional mannerisms. “My name is Bindi. If you ever need anything, please don’t hesitate to call on me.”

I gave her a pleasant nod before she continued on down the hall with a feather duster in hand.

All right, all the windows then.

My lungs filled with the stale air that smelled of old earth and moldy decay. I understood now what Bindi was talking about. The castle never used to smell like this.

I went to the first window a few steps from me down the hall, released the latch, and pushed it up by the frame, but I

barely managed to get it to budge.

I could see that the vines intertwining around the wood frame weren't alone to blame for the window being stuck, though. It also looked like it hadn't been cleaned or maintained for a very long time—even years maybe.

I was able to get hold of a knife, which I used to cut the vines, and when that wasn't the only solution needed, I used it as a lever as well. After that, I kept going to the next window. And the next. Repeating the process.

Some needed more force than others, but as I moved through the castle doing this, I got lost in my thoughts. The fact that Kaine wasn't sure whether our curses had been broken with the death of the Fae King or not had me worried. Were we supposed to have felt something if it had been lifted?

I was so focused I almost didn't see Kaine as I walked right by him. He was busy talking to two centaurs. He looked up nonchalantly at first but then again once he realized it was me. His expression softened, and his smile lit a light behind his eyes, all while still trying to pay attention to the conversation he was supposed to be in.

My face flushed with warmth, and my heart fluttered with a blossoming love, all as I tried to suppress the massive full-on grin pulling at the corners of my mouth—forcing it to stay within the parameters of a normal smile.

“Good morning, Sophia.” A white orb descended down from the ceiling and stopped once she was level with my face.

I couldn't see which Light Fae it was, so I just gave them a polite nod.

“You are looking well. It is most joyous to see you in such a manner.” The glowing orb then pulsed and formed into the form of a small woman. It was Edith.

“Oh, hi, Edith. I didn't expect to see you so soon after what happened...” I tilted my head and furrowed my brows, even as I tried not to look like I was pitying her. “I hope you didn't feel obligated to show up today.”

She had just lost the equivalent of a sister after all.

“Don’t worry about me, Sophia. I am perfectly well. I know that Theodosia has now returned to the Source, to the air and light all around us. Although I’ll miss seeing her every day, I know that she is always with me.” Edith spoke with a lightness and acceptance toward death I doubted I could ever achieve if I’d lost one of my siblings, friends ... or Kaine. “Besides, even now, I can make her happy by staying true to our promise to take care of you.”

I knew better than to argue with a Light Fae, so I decided to let it go. I didn’t mind the company anyway.

I continued going about opening windows, and a few successful hallways later, I realized that Edith must’ve been helping me in some way with her magic. I hadn’t had to fight to get a single one open after she’d shown up.

“I have a question for you, but I’m not sure if you’ll even know the answer to it,” I began, opening another window without a hitch.

“I will do the best that I can nonetheless.”

“All right,” I said, taking a deep breath and turning to face her. “If someone is no longer cursed, would they know?”

Edith went quiet for a while, scratching at the back of her little ear as she considered it. Whether she was deliberating the answer or deciding if she was allowed to give me this information, I couldn’t tell.

“I suppose that would depend on the severity of the curse. It’s likely for one to get cursed and never know it. But if you’re referring to your curse, or Kaine’s, I’d say that’s certainly a different situation. Only time will tell if you’ve been relieved of them.”

I could tell she’d decided to answer me diplomatically. She was avoiding coming out and outright confirming that I should have indeed noticed a difference by now.

I was beginning to think that everyone except for me knew what was going on. If neither Kaine nor the Light Fae were going to tell me the truth, then how was I supposed to figure it

out? I hated to be kept in the dark, especially when it came to such an important matter.

The thought frustrated me, and as I tried opening a door that was stuck, the anger within me mounted. I jiggled and tried forcing the lock, but it refused to open and let me in to open more windows.

“Edith, can you please fetch Garmilen? He must have a key to this door.”

She was all too eager as she gave me a playful salute and then disappeared.

I knelt down and positioned one of my eyes in front of the keyhole, trying to see into the room. It didn't look like anything of value was in there.

Then why was I getting an unsettled feeling about whatever was behind this door?

Quick and precise footsteps came from down the hallway, and I turned to see Garmilen pulling out his ring of keys. “This is the room you can't open? How peculiar. I can't remember the last time we used this room for anything.”

I stood up and stepped away from the door before grabbing his arm to stop him. “Garmilen, I think there's something in there.”

He put his ear against the door and listened. As a shifter, he was likely able to hear even if there was merely a moth fluttering around in there.

But the look he gave me after a few moments of concentration turned my blood to ice. He nodded, moving me farther away from the door and looking at Edith.

They signaled something silently to each other before he put the key into the hole.

As the door swung open, the air hitched in my lungs.

I couldn't move.

I could hardly breathe.

I could barely comprehend what I was looking at, even as immense horror weighed down on me.

Garmilen and Edith were just as frozen in place as I was.

“What the fuck is this?” I blurted out as my world crumbled away from right under me.

SOPHIA

*I*t's her...

My eyes were transfixed on the woman sitting inside the room with her back against the foot of the bed. She was huddled with her knees pulled up to her chest as she shook in a thin undergarment.

How—?

The woman looked up at me. Her eyes were red and puffy. She'd clearly been crying.

She stumbled to her feet and rushed at me. My first instinct was that she was trying to attack me, but I couldn't make my body move. By the time she'd thrown her arms around my waist and was holding on as if her life depended on it, it was too late anyway.

"Help me," she mumbled into the fabric of my dress before looking up into my eyes with desperation.

My wide eyes were stock still as I stared down at her in disbelief.

Even in her disheveled state, I'd recognized her as soon as Garmilen had opened the door.

It was the woman from the portrait. Kaine's dead mate.

This was Lilliana.

I looked up at Garmilen, praying that he would tell me that this was some huge mistake, but he was just as shocked as I was. Maybe even more.

Perhaps I was still dreaming. Surely, only in a cruel nightmare could something like this be happening to me now.

“Come, we’ll take care of you,” I said vacantly, my voice not my own. It was as if I was outside of my body, looking down on the scene as a helpless ghost.

This felt too surreal to be true.

But still, I helped her downstairs, took her along the backway to get into the kitchen, and gave her some water. I realized I was trying to keep her from being seen by anybody else.

There was one person in particular I definitely didn’t want to find out about her.

My heart ached as if it was dying in my chest.

This was a trick. A cruel trick. Nothing more.

“Where did you come from? Did the Dark Fae bring you here?” I sat down next to her, trying to keep my composure.

“I don’t know. I can’t seem to remember anything. I don’t even know who I am.” She pressed her fingers into her temple as if even thinking about it gave her a migraine.

“We must bring this up to the Alpha King at once,” Garmilen warned me, despite the fact that he knew how much it pained me to hear.

He was right, as much as I hated it. There was no way I would be able to keep this a secret anyhow.

He would know the moment he looked at my face that I was hiding something. Mates shared a mental link, so he might already know.

Wait, if she’s back, does that mean Kaine and I are no longer mates?

Terror swelled even more within me now.

Garmilen helped her up from the bench in the kitchen, and led her to the study room where Kaine seemed to be busy organizing things.

He looked up and gave me a smile before noticing the woman between Garmilen and I. The blood bleached from his face in an instant. “What in the hell is this?”

“We don’t know, Sire. We found her in a locked room on the third floor. She’s sick and confused. She doesn’t remember how she got here ... or who she is.” Garmilen explained the facts in an almost mindless manner.

My heart felt like it was going to shatter into a million pieces, but I held onto it inwardly. I had to hide that all I wanted to do was scream and let the tears of sorrow loose.

Was I a horrible and selfish person for hoping he wouldn’t care that she’d returned?

But of course, he would care. She was his love, his queen, his true mate.

He’d lost her so suddenly that he still mourned her even after all the years that had passed. I’d seen it. Even though it had been a trick the Fae King had tormented him with back then, pretending to be her inside a mirror, there was no denying that his love for her was still deep and very present.

The only saving grace in this situation was that Lilliana didn’t seem to recognize Kaine at all.

“Get her out of here,” he said suddenly in a low rumble, like thunder threatening to erupt. “Tieni!”

The fury in his reaction startled me. And by the way the woman next to me jerked and started shaking, he’d scared her as well.

Tieni came quickly, taking a moment to herself to process seeing Lilliana as well. “My Goddess...”

“Tieni, take her to a room until I can figure out what the fuck is going on here!”

I couldn’t recall a time I’d ever seen him this explosive—not in his human form.

He was shaken, truly, and it wasn’t because he was angry. He was terrified.

Tieni took Lilliana away, and I remained by the doorway watching Kaine as he watched me, both of us confused and uncertain of what to do.

“Soph—” He tried to lure me closer, but I couldn’t stand another moment here.

“I’m sorry. I have to go.” I rushed out of the study before he was able to stop me.

I found myself hurtling for the Library without knowing where I was going. I only knew I had to get somewhere I’d feel safe.

I locked the door behind me and curled up on the ground in a corner. I felt sick to my stomach and weak, but I also burned with an anger that was unfamiliar to me.

After less than an hour, there was a knock on the door. It was Tieni. “My dear, Kaine is requesting to see you. He’s waiting in his room.”

I didn’t answer.

“You should at least talk to him. He is just as wounded as you are about this.”

I doubt that very much.

“No... I can’t see him.” I blubbered the words out, feeling like a sulking child, but I wasn’t ready. I didn’t think I’d ever be.

Tieni knew better than to push me, though. She sighed at the door and walked away.

If shifters mate for life, then where does that leave me?

SOPHIA

I was stirred awake by another knock at the door. I sat up quickly, only to feel a sharp pain in my lower back from sleeping on the floor in an awkward upright position. I stood up, slowly making my way over to the door.

I figured it had to be Tieni again, coming back to make sure that I was all right.

I opened the door, preparing to tell her that I was still not ready to face Kaine, but I was surprised to see that it was Lexi standing in the doorway.

“There you are! Tieni told me you’d be in here,” she declared, throwing her arms around my shoulders and pulling me into a warm hug.

“Lexi,” I mouthed in shock before hugging her back.

She was exactly the person I wanted to talk to. She always had a knack for knowing exactly what I needed to hear.

“How are you feeling?” I brushed my fingers gently through her long, silky brown hair.

“I’m still a little weak, but I’m much better now knowing you’re safe.” She pulled away to get a good look at my face. “Uh-oh. I know that look. You’ve been crying all night, haven’t you? What’s happened?”

“Oh, Lexi. The most awful thing. I—” I hesitated telling her. If I said it out loud, then that would make it real.

Right now, my mind was still trying to deal with it as if it was just a horrible dream.

I pressed my lips together in thought before deciding that I would feel better once I talked to Lexi about everything.

That was what she was best at, making sense of things that were too painful for me to think about.

So, I explained it all to her. Every little detail. I didn't leave out a thing. At times, I felt as if I was vouching for Lilliana to rightfully return to Kaine's side, while at other times, I was desperately trying to convince her and myself that I still had a place here with him.

"My, this is a tough situation..." She was thoughtful for a moment, but as she reached for my hand, pulling it into her lap and holding me tightly, she said, "But Kaine is with you now, isn't he? He has made his choice. Why do you think he would just change his mind like that?"

"I—I'm not sure. She was his first. He still loves her. And I can't help but think that she's returned to be restored to her rightful place." I had to avert my eyes. I couldn't face her piercing gaze when I felt so close to falling apart.

"Is that really it, or are you looking for an easy way out because you don't believe you're enough for Kaine, and that he should be with his own kind?" Her words struck the air right out of me.

"I don't know," I all but sobbed out.

"I think you do, Soph. You think you're not worthy of being fought for by anyone, while you're willing to fight for everyone." She gathered both of my hands in hers and made me look her in the eyes. "But weren't you the one who led the charge on the castle and helped drive out all those monsters? There's nothing wrong with Kaine wanting to pick you—fight for you."

As if her words weren't able to stick, I went on saying, "The other issue is that Lilliana and Kaine have bound their souls together. It's a shifter ritual that is basically unbreakable."

Why was I arguing against her when she was on my side?

"Even surpassing death?"

In truth, I didn't know if that made a difference. I shook and hung my head.

"There you have it," she drawled, gently squeezing my hands inside hers. "You don't know how everything works, so don't go making assumptions and go making yourself sick over nothing. Besides, we don't even know if this woman is even the real Lilliana! She could just be another cheap trick invented by the Dark Fae, which means you're needed here more than ever. So just have patience. Everything will be revealed in time."

The strain in my chest dissipated, and I no longer felt as if I was going to have a heart attack. Her reassurances had actually worked. I lifted my eyes to her and smiled.

"You should also talk to Kaine about this. I'm sure he needs you to work through this with him. Neither of you need to go at it alone, for it will only breed more uncertainty and misery if you do," she offered, and I was reminded how wise beyond her years she'd always been.

"He did already try to talk to me last night, but I didn't want to face him, so I declined his invitation."

Lexi's face went from comforting to agitated. "Are you telling me you preferred to struggle with your imagination all night alone instead of just going to talk to him, even after he asked you to?"

I gave her a nervous smile and shrugged my shoulders. "Letting my imagination run wild was less scary at the time than finding out how he actually felt. In my head, there are endless possibilities, but from his mouth, there is only one. What he says is definitive and final ... and I'm terrified of what might come out."

And that was the heart of the matter.

He picks her over me, and I'm hurt and heartbroken forever. Or he picks me over her, and I will forever wonder if he only did it to save me from that outcome...

"Sophia Everly, you go talk to that poor man this instant!" Lexi commanded, crossing her arms and glaring at me.

“But what if—”

“This instant!” she repeated more forcefully.

“Fine! *Fine*. I’m going.” I threw my hands up over my head in defeat. I marched out of the Library, not entirely motivated or happy about it, but not as miserable as before either.

As soon as I closed the door behind me, the reality of having to actually talk to him settled into my bones. My heart galloped around in my chest like a nervous mare, spooking at her own shadow around every corner.

You can do this, Soph. You talk to Kaine all the time. Why should this be any different?

I continued encouraging myself all the way as I descended the stairs and entered the formal entertainment space. Kaine was there in the middle of expressing his ideas on how to fix the crumbling infrastructure.

I only just made it to the threshold of the door before losing all the courage I had gathered on the walk over here. I watched him with his sleeves rolled up and his hair a perfect mess on his head, and knew that I couldn’t face him.

Kaine turned his head in my direction, but I made sure I was out of his sight before he noticed me. I leaned against the cold stone wall as my heart threatened to break right through my ribs.

My stomach churned and twisted into knots.

I can’t do it...

I walked out of the castle like the pathetic little scaredy cat I was, seeking the solitude of the forest instead of running the risk of bumping into Kaine again, or anyone else that would be disappointed with my cowardice.

Just outside of the steps of the castle was the centaur who’d grieved his friend after the battle. As if for the first time, I noticed how very tanned and chestnut his coat on his horse body was. Even the hair on his human head was of the same stunning coloring.

His hair was long and held back by a series of melted gold pieces. His hooves had gold engravings on them as well, and his olive skin glistened with sweat against the sun.

I wondered for how long he'd been out here, and why.

I nervously knotted my hands together before deciding to approach him. "It's a nice day today, isn't it?"

He looked up quickly as if he didn't hear me coming up behind him. He gave me a half-hearted smile and agreed. "Indeed. It is."

I tucked my dress behind my knees and sat down on the bench that was next to him.

The clean, cool breeze blew through my hair, and it felt like it carried away some of my worries with it.

"Why are you here?" His question took me by surprise.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I can leave you alone if you want." I started to stand up, but he turned his head away and laughed.

"That's not what I meant," he said and looked at me with a smile that could end the fiercest of winters.

Woah...

"What I mean is, why are you here in this forest? You risked your life for people that don't even like your kind." His brown eyes were large, soft, and intelligent. They regarded me with a kind of sincerity that made me want to pour my heart out to him.

"It wasn't just for the magical creatures, though," I told him truthfully. "The Dark Fae would have taken over everything, not just the forest."

He seemed to ponder on my words for a while, but his smile returned as he said, "I've been meaning to apologize to you for scaring the hell out of you before." Though his tone was lighthearted, something behind his light brown eyes hinted that he was actually troubled.

Scaring me?

He had to be referring to when he'd stopped me at the entrance of the forest with Sharra and Berrok.

“Did I look scared?” I asked jokingly. “I wouldn't flatter myself. I hardly noticed you.”

He threw his head back and laughed heartily.

“Sophia?” Sharra's voice came from behind me. “Still hiding from Kaine, I see,” she surmised correctly, shaking her head while crossing her arms at me saucily.

“How did you know I was—?”

She rolled her eyes over to her left as she interjected, “The maids talk, and with business this insane, it's impossible for *anyone* to miss.”

“What's going on now?” A certain nosey centaur poked his head out from behind me to catch Sharra's attention.

“She's freaking out about a fake Lilliana's return,” she said as if it wasn't a big deal, and I was just being overdramatic. “I'm sure you've heard about it, too.”

“Oh, is that why you're out here hiding?” he sang out like a torch had just been lit inside his head.

This just keeps getting better and better. Does the whole damn forest know?

“The Alpha King is clearly smitten with you,” he said in astonishment. “I mean, you saved his entire kingdom, for Goddess's sake.”

That was easy for him to say; he wasn't the one standing between two soul-bound lovers!

I paused.

So that's it.... I feel like I'm in the way.

“Please excuse me.” I quickly stood up and returned to the castle before Sharra could stop me. “I really just need to be alone right now.”

I spent the rest of the night in my room foregoing dinner and the many calls I received.

I couldn't bear to look anyone in the face, especially not now that I knew I was the talk of the castle.

SOPHIA

I awoke after a fairly restless night to an aching stomach. I needed to eat something.

Maybe I can sneak into the kitchen while breakfast is being served. I can then make it back up here before anyone notices.

The idea sounded just foolish enough to work.

I quickly threw a robe over my nightgown and opened the door to my bedroom. Only to be met with the very last person I wanted to see.

What fresh hell is this?

Lilliana was just passing by my door as I opened it. “Oh, good morning. You’re Sophia, right?”

I pressed my lips together into a hard line and forced a smile. “Mh-hm.”

“I’m happy to see you again. I know it sounds strange being that we’re strangers, but you were the first person I met here. I’d like us to be friends.” She was so effortlessly friendly and warm.

It made me feel small and worthless compared to her. Even more so because I was having mean-spirited thoughts about her while she was clearly not out to sabotage me or break my heart. She was trying to make the best out of her own confusing situation.

I relented. It was impossible to stay enemies with this open and affectionate woman now that she was standing right in front of me. “I hope everyone’s been treating you well?”

“That’s the strange thing, I’m treated too carefully. Everyone’s always looking at me like they’re afraid of me—like I’m some strange creature or something.”

Oh, you have no idea.

“I’m sure they’re just wary of you because you can’t remember much about yourself. We still don’t know if your being here has something to do with a Dark Fae plot.” I decided the best thing was to be truthful with her.

She deserved at least that much.

“I see... At least the King doesn’t seem to treat me this way. He’s fairly kind ... attentive almost.” Lilliana’s cheeks turned a soft pink.

Ice lanced through my spine. This was too much.

“I’m sorry. I—”

Without giving an explanation, I backed away from her and fled to the opposite end of the hallway. Only when I turned the corner did I stop to catch my breath.

“Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?” Berrok’s voice sounded like music to my ears. If anyone was going to avoid talking about personal matters, it would be him.

I turned and gave him a smile, but his face fell a second later.

“Are you all right?” He moved toward me with his hand outstretched, but stopped before he touched me, as if he just remembered something.

“What do you—?” I started to say before I felt tears dripping onto my chest. I quickly wiped them away at the source. “No, I’m fine. I just—this is just...”

“Talk to me,” he said, his frown deepening. “You faced an army of Dark Fae and confronted that rabid beast of a man who came close to ripping your head off. What could you possibly be scared of?”

He was trying to be reassuring, and it felt like it was working. I laughed lightly and wiped the final tears dry.

“That’s a very good point. Thanks, Berrok,” I patted him on the arm. “You know, for a heartless creature hunter, you’re not all that bad.”

“I suppose I’ll take that as a compliment, despite how it sounded,” he laughed, his whole chest shaking.

His laugh was so infectious, I couldn’t help but join in.

“Sophia!” Kaine’s commanding voice ripped down the hallway.

I turned to see him charging at us like hell was on his heels.

“I’ve been looking for you for days, and I find you here with this *creature hunter*?” he snarled the last part as if the words tasted bad in his mouth.

“He’s my friend, Kaine. At least, he’s not a past lover that’s suddenly popped up out of nowhere.” The spiteful words came out of my mouth before I had a chance to stop them.

Kaine’s fury vanished from his face, and he even stumbled a step back. But he quickly collected himself again with a deep breath. “Sophia, this is not the place.”

“Why not? This is as good a place as any!” I flailed my arms out at the empty and spacious hallway. “What’s going on with Lilliana?”

“Uh, this doesn’t seem like any of my business.” Berrok bowed out quickly.

Kaine waited, staring at me with a raging fire in his eyes, until the hunter turned the corner. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Kaine. It really is beneath you. Everyone can tell that she is the spitting image of the dead queen. That’s not a coincidence. It’s time to start discussing the possibility that the Dark Fae stuck true to their word about bringing her back from the dead.”

Why was I yelling at him? He didn’t do anything wrong... This wasn’t his fault.

I expected him to match me and reply angrily, but his stricken expression only softened. “That’s what has been hurting you so much?” he asked, almost looking relieved. “Believe me, nothing is going on between me and that woman.”

I dropped my face into my hands and squeezed my temples.

Everything in my body ached all at once. It felt like that year when I’d gotten a severe flu. I had thought I was going to die back then.

Kaine pulled me into his arms and held me tightly.

He held onto me in the same way he had every time before all this ... like he was afraid I’d slip away through his fingers.

K A I N E

I sat in my room alone since Sophia outright refused to sleep next to me with that woman in my castle. I couldn't really blame her.

This was the hardest on Sophia because she had a good heart. She always felt for everyone else before herself, no matter the circumstance. It was one of the things that frustrated me the most about her—and what made me fall in love with her in the first place.

I just hoped she didn't try to push me away for the sake of some Dark Fae trick. Because that's what all this had to be.

She can't really be Lilliana.

I had spent such a very long time mourning her that I never thought I could love anyone ever again.

Then Sophia came along and changed all of that. I was a different man now because of her.

How could she possibly think that I would discard her just like that?

My chest ached with the same pain she felt, though I suspected she had no idea. We were already so intertwined even though we hadn't fully bonded our souls together yet.

Many things about my life right now were uncertain, but not Sophia. These feelings I had for her were much more potent than even I was used to.

There was something much greater between Sophia and I. I just didn't know how to tell her in a way that would make

her believe me, and make her never doubt me again no matter what happened.

Then there was the other issue of that woman. She surely looked like Lilliana, but she was devoid of everything else. She had no memory. She wasn't even a shifter. She was a mortal.

If this was indeed a ploy by the Fae King to torture me, then why hadn't he brought her back *with* her memories?

There was only one way to find out more information.

I had to speak with this woman about it directly.



The next day came too quickly, and the thought of having to confront this woman who looked like Lilliana made me sick to my stomach.

I called on Tieni to summon her since I knew Tieni would be the most discreet about it. The last thing I needed was for Sophia to find out I talked to her about anything. I didn't want to upset her any more than she already was.

The knock at the door was soft but pounded in my ears with a warning. Then the door opened.

Tieni let the woman inside and closed the door behind her before I could ask her to stay.

I had hoped Tieni would at least remain in the room with me. This would look horrible to anyone walking in.

I'd better make this quick then.

"I'm sure you can imagine why you're here. You pose a great threat to the safety of my people, and I need to know why you were being kept here by the Dark Fae." I made sure to keep my desk in between us, which wasn't an issue because she stood nervously by the door, afraid to come any closer.

"I still haven't recovered any memory. I'm sorry. I can only remember that my name is Yenisey." She squeezed her

elbow anxiously. “I don’t know why I was so important that they kept me locked up in that room.”

“I know why you were important,” I said, my voice sounding deep and grim even to my own ears.

She didn’t know anything, and I couldn’t even return her to wherever she’d come from because she didn’t remember.

“Can you tell me? I feel my presence has caused a disturbance, but I don’t know why.”

I let out a heavy sigh while pinching the bridge of my nose in frustration.

Am I really going to tell her? Is this information pertinent for her to know?

“You resemble the Queen of the Ulric family. She died a long time ago. That is why.” I stared at her, but she didn’t seem to understand why that mattered.

“I wouldn’t dream of trying to take the throne from you if that’s what you’re worried about,” she croaked out, even more nervous now, waving her hands at me in surrender.

“That is not the concern everyone has. She wasn’t just any Queen. She was ... my mate.” Her eyes went wide, and her face turned red. “I need to see something. I need to know beyond the shadow of a doubt.”

“Anything.” She sounded breathless.

Hesitantly, I approached her and raised my hand, palm facing her while looking into her eyes.

I motioned for her to do the same, and she jerkily raised her palm toward mine. Her hand almost touched mine, but the door swung open behind her, startling the both of us.

Dammit!

It was Sophia.

I didn’t know what possessed her to come and seek me out after hiding from me for days, but this was the most inopportune time for her to have done so.

Her wide green eyes jumped between us before backing away. “I’m—sorry.”

She darted out, slamming the door behind her.

“Sophia!” I ran out after her, shouting her name despite the attention it was drawing to me. Finally, I was able to catch up to her. “Sophia, stop!”

She spun around with tears in her eyes. “No, Kaine. You stop! I can’t do this anymore. It’s too painful not knowing what’s going to happen next. I can’t—I won’t do this to myself anymore. We should stop.”

She pushed my hand off her arm before cradling it into her body.

No, Sophia. Don’t say that.

“Is that ... what you really want?” Why was I asking that? I should be demanding she stop saying such horrible things.

She nodded her head slowly. “At least until we can sort this out.”

SOPHIA

I looked out of the window of the Library to see the almost full moon hanging low in the starry sky. Lexi had spent the entire day with me here.

She wasn't much of a reader, so she either talked or napped most of the time, but it was still nice to have her with me. It reminded me of how things used to be. Life had been much simpler as a farmer's daughter.

As Lexi had been snoring away in the armchair next to me, I'd been studying a book the Library had given me on shifters.

It'd shed some light on Kaine's history, his father's rule, and their religion. At least half of the book was dedicated to their Moon Goddess, Helene. Apparently, she'd been created at the same time as the sun, and was one of the first goddesses to roam the earth.

Her sister, Delvine, was the Sun Goddess and stood for the creatures of light, while Helene was for the creatures of the dark.

That then made Kaine and all the shifters, creatures of the dark.

How did they end up being chosen as the protectors of the forest? I wondered.

I continued flipping through page after page until I found something on shifter mates.

According to this, mates were rarely appointed to shifters. They were only given to those in high power, or to those who

had earned the grace of Helene. It also said that a mate had to be someone with magic in their blood. It didn't necessarily have to be a shifter, but could never be a full mortal either...

My hands suddenly felt weak, and the book slipped out of my fingers. The book's spine hit the table with a loud crack before falling to the floor.

Lexi jerked awake. "What was that?" When I didn't answer and just kept staring at the book on the floor, she pressed, "Sophia?"

"Nothing," I said laughingly as I came back to myself, but she still eyed me suspiciously. "I think I'm just getting tired from all the reading."

Had I only been made Kaine's mate because of whatever the Fae King had done to me when I was a baby?

If that is the case, then what does this mean for us now?

I worried I had somehow tricked the Goddess, Helene. Even if it had been unbeknownst to me, would she sever our mate bond? Punish me?

Perhaps what Kaine had suspected before was correct, and the Fae King wasn't dead after all.

"I think I'll head to bed now. Thank you for staying with me, Lexi."

"Of course. I'm not sure that I actually did very much to help out," she said sheepishly, flashing a poor attempt at a guilty smile as she followed me out into the hallway. "Good night, Soph. Call me if you need me."

After thanking her and assuring her that I would, she headed toward her room, and I made my way downstairs once I was out of her sight.

I wanted to pray to Helene without being within earshot of everyone in the castle. I luckily didn't run into anyone on the way as I exited quietly through the door, and went straight for the garden.

The night air was crisp and welcoming.

But it also felt like the wind itself was drawing me farther in and to the back of the garden. I followed it and found a good spot by a bench tucked away near the shadows of some trees.

As the moon cast its gentle beam of light down on my head, I could feel it. Somehow, I just knew that I was being watched by otherworldly eyes. I should have been scared, but I was strangely calm.

I dragged my hands down the front of my thighs so my dress could fold with me as I knelt down by the bench. The fabric pooled out around me dramatically over the vines and stone tiles.

“Goddess Helene, I call upon you now to set right a mistake that was made. I am not a creature of magic. I am simply a mortal. I do not deserve the honor you’ve bestowed upon me ... as much as I want it.” I prayed to her so hard that my hands were shaking and getting sore. “I never intended to deceive you. I only pray that you will allow Kaine the happiness he deserves, and grant me the wisdom and guidance to not interfere with it.”

I could still feel the eyes on me, and even my chest started to quake from some unseen pressure surrounding me, but I received no answer.

“Goddess?”

A twig snapped behind me, but as I turned to see if she had come to me, all magical expectations I might have had vanished when I saw who it was.

The Beast was approaching, his yellow eyes focused on only me.

I frowned at him and placed my folded hands in my lap. “How did you know I was out here?”

Perhaps there is still a bond between us after all.

He bowed his head before me, and I ran my fingers through his jet-black fur. I couldn’t resist. It came as naturally as breathing, to want to touch him. Console him.

Pain was practically seeping from his entire body.

I pulled him closer, hugging his head to my chest, and melted into the feeling of him breathing along with me. “I’m scared, Kaine. I don’t want to lose you. But this just confirms what I had already been feeling... That I don’t deserve to be with you. I’m nobody.”

My deepest fears that I had been holding in these last few days came pouring out. I realized I found it much easier to speak to Kaine in his shifted form.

He lifted his head, and I released him. Looking into the bright yellow eyes that hung like moons on his dark lupine face, I could tell that he was trying to tell me something.

Usually, I could get an impression of what he was trying to say, even if I couldn’t hear him in my mind, but for some reason I couldn’t even do that now.

He came alongside me, rubbing his back against my shoulder, and only then did I get it.

“I don’t know...”

He urged me again—even throwing in a little whine—and I conceded rather easily.

He lowered himself enough so I could raise my foot and swing my leg over to his other side. His fur felt rough and scratchy against the insides of my legs.

I held on to the thick fur on the back of his neck as he stood up. The sudden motion awakened the feeling between my legs that I would rather have wanted to ignore.

Kaine either didn’t realize or was too polite to bring attention to it.

The silence stretched between us, though not in an uncomfortable way, as he wandered deep into the forest with me.

“We’re pretty far from the castle now. If you’re planning on murdering me and disposing of my body at an undisclosed location, this is probably it,” I laughed nervously, only half joking.

He shook his large wolf head with a heavy sigh, not finding my attempt at humor funny at all.

We continued in more silence, and I took this time to simply bask in his presence.

Kaine slowed down as we approached a long curtain of moss streaming down from the trees and touching the ground ten feet below the branches. He walked forward through the moss, and I used my hands to part them.

Just beyond that heavy curtain was pitch-black darkness.

The trees were so thick that the moon had no hope of reaching this area—nor would the sun during the day I'd bet.

If I hadn't just seen where we had entered, I would have thought we'd walked into a cave.

But the most magnificent part was what came next. As I looked around us, I gasped in awe and wonder.

Mushrooms grew as tall as eight feet and were decorated with little dazzling lights.

The moss on the rocks even glowed with a faint green hue.

The small spring of water in the middle of the dark area was speckled with little blue lights. They seemed to be dancing around each other in unison like a school of fish.

Bioluminescent life seemed to be thriving within this space of perpetual night.

I swung my leg over to Kaine's other side and slipped off his back. Every step that I took lit up more things.

It was as if the land itself here was reactive to my every movement. It was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen. And to think that this magic only existed because Kaine was the ruler over the Spirit of the Forest...

I looked back at him and smiled. I didn't have any words, and none were needed right now. This moment was ours and ours alone.

No one could take it from us.

K A I N E

The next day continued the same as the last few days had, without much sight of Sophia.

I was beginning to see more of Yenisey than I was of Sophia, despite my trying to avoid her. I had thought a few times about throwing her out on her ass, but something told me that would upset Sophia even more.

Since when did I spend my time worrying about angering a mortal? I was sure my father would be rolling over in his grave if he saw me right now.

On a much lighter note, in just a handful of days, we'd managed to get my home almost back to normal.

Some of the damage was simply impossible to undo, however, at least the hanging scent of rot in the vines was gone.

As I carried on going about my day, feeling much like a body without a soul, I ended up not paying attention to the people I passed.

I recalled feeling something similar in the first few weeks after losing Lilliana. The only difference now was that the woman I loved wasn't dead, she was just avoiding me.

Or was she?

I smelled the sweet scent of honey and clean linen before there was even a glimpse of her.

She had just come out of the Library. I could smell the parchment and book glue on her skin. My nose even told me

that she'd gotten herself a small paper cut on one of her fingers.

As she came around the corner, her head jolted up in surprise, but her warm smile followed quickly.

Goddess, she's beautiful. In every way. In everything.

I continued walking nonchalantly, as did she, for it had been her intention to simply pass by me without a word.

The idea of it alone filled me with panic and ire.

I couldn't bear it any longer. How could I keep pretending like I didn't need her by my side at every waking moment if everything within me kept screaming that I did?

This dance we were doing around each other had to end. Now.

I grabbed her arm firmly and pulled her into the closest room to us.

"Kaine, what are you—?" She began, but I silenced her the instant my lips took possession of hers.

She succumbed to the kiss without another complaint. Her head leaned back into my hand, and her body pressed into mine.

Have mercy on me. This woman has command over my entire soul.

I pulled away only a few inches from her face so I could look at her. Her eyes fluttered open slowly, and the deep green orbs stared back at me blissfully.

The thing inside my chest was stomping against my ribcage to a maddening beat.

To have her wasn't a *want* anymore. Every fiber of my being needed her like I needed my next breath. Gravity was no longer tethering me to the ground, but to her.

She looked at me as if she wasn't sure. How could she possibly not know?

What she saw as obstacles were mere stepping stones for me.

There was no one else for me, only her.

“Hear me now, Sophia Everly. I have made my choice. Nothing on this earth can shift that. You can continue to come up with excuse after excuse, but it will not deter me. I do not care that you are mortal, or that it goes against everything I’ve been taught.”

“Kaine—” Her eyes shifted away from me, and I knew I was losing her to her own thoughts again.

“I love you, Sophia.”

She stopped and stood completely still. Even the air in her lungs seemed too shocked to come out all of a sudden.

“Possibly more than I’ve ever loved anything before,” I confessed and pulled her in for another kiss.

This time she didn’t just give in to me. Her lips moved to mine with an insatiable fire and hunger now. I groaned into her mouth as a maelstrom of desire burst through me.

My hands began pulling away at the delicate material of her dress, and she pulled at my clothes.

This love terrified me.

I briefly wondered what this violent emotion could make me capable of if she ever got hurt or taken from me again.

I lifted her into my arms with ease, and gave another groan of approval when I found her already wet.

Heat emanated from between her legs like a warm, welcoming hearth in the dead of winter.

How could I refuse such a delectable offering?

I entered her slowly, relishing every little moan escaping her mouth as we moved together.

“Don’t stop!” she gasped, dragging her fingernails down my chest and drawing blood.

I smiled. Trophies of War, I decided to call them if they were to leave scars.

My lips pressed against hers as we were both nearing our release. She drew out bits of my soul with every breath she took out of my mouth.

Drink me in then, Sophia. Take all that I have until there is nothing left of me. I wouldn't want it any other way.

I was sinking deeper and deeper into this damnation with her—for her. There was no hope of salvation, not that I ever would want there to be.

My muscles tightened around her, and I was blinded by the surge of sweet agony pulsating through me.

I could feel the raptures building up in her body as well.

She was close.

‘Sophia.’ I let out a ghastly groan before I ascended into a whirlwind of pleasure.

Her body tensed in my arms as she called out, ‘Kaine!’

SOPHIA

I was having the loveliest dream, but I couldn't quite remember it as it was happening. I could recall the feeling, though.

It was like I was made of magic and wind.

Freedom and power encompassed me.

That feeling disappeared as soon as I woke up.

"Sire! Come quick! You're not going to believe this." Garmilen barged into Kaine's room.

I quickly pulled up the thin sheets over my naked body, mortified at the intrusion.

Kaine sat up in a panic and looked at me first to make sure that I was all right, then said to Garmilen, "I'll be right there."

We wasted no time getting dressed and going downstairs.

My heart pounded in my ears so loudly that I couldn't hear a word Kaine was telling me.

By the time we reached the foyer, the rest of the castle was already down there, waiting.

"What's happening?" I asked Tieni, but she could barely speak. She was in shock.

I pushed my way through the others to get to the front, where Kaine was, to see General Eugin standing by the front doors. He was looking a little worse for wear.

“How can you be here?” Kaine asked him, looking over the ten or so other shifter guards with the General in bewilderment. “What happened? I thought you were all killed.”

I remembered seeing all of these men riding off to the battle in the swamplands over two months ago. And by his look of absolute shock, Kaine hadn’t seen them since then either, and had thought they’d perished in that battle.

“Sire, we only just woke up in the forest like this two hours ago. None of us have any recollection of what happened after the battle, so we made sure to come back here immediately,” General Eugin said somberly, even though it was a miracle they’d all made it back alive. “But on our way here, we discovered a marching army making their way here, too.”

Are we under attack? Could it be the Dark Fae or the Prince?

“Gather the forces we have. It’s most important that we protect the north end of the castle—” Kaine began strategizing, but was interrupted.

“No, Sire. You don’t understand. It’s *our* army,” General Eugin emphasized.

Kaine tilted his head in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that the men we’ve lost to the Dark Fae ... the ones from decades ago... They’re back. It appears they were imprisoned but not killed. They’re waiting right outside for you, but I’d advise—”

“Or can it be that they were killed but brought back for some reason?” Kaine looked at me to see my face change upon realizing what he was saying. “Open the doors,” he commanded quietly, and the guards glanced around at each other uncertainly. “Open the doors!” He was less polite this time.

The guards decided that they stood a better chance against the army outside than an angry Alpha King.

The heavy grand doors opened, letting in the piercing light of the morning sun. I squinted but was only able to see the silhouettes of a hundred heads standing at the doorstep.

The men outside began cheering upon seeing Kaine. They appeared to be delighted to see their King alive and well.

Some of the men who were in front began to tell Kaine everything that had happened, but I couldn't hear a word of it.

This should have been a good thing...

Why does it feel so wrong then?

One of the guards from Eugin's company looked beyond me and smacked the guard next to him. "Is that—?"

Whatever drew their attention ran through them like a plague as they all looked past Kaine.

"I can't believe it!" one of them exclaimed, and a few of them rushed to Lilliana. "It's our Queen! She's back!"

They began crying and hugging each other.

I didn't need to turn around to know exactly who they were looking at. Instead, I looked at Kaine as the disheartened feeling settled into my bones.

I could see the anger building up on Kaine's face. His claws were practically ripping through his fingertips already.

"Stop!" His shout was so powerful that it shook the very foundations of the stone we stood on. "She is not your Queen!"

Complete and utter silence ensued.

I finally turned to see that Lilliana was shaking in terror, her eyes wide, and her lips trembling. I realized that I wasn't the only one suffering between us.

She was being held responsible for something she had nothing to do with.

I approached her, taking her arm in mine and pulling her away from the crowd. "Maybe we should go for a walk. Some air might do us good."

Lilliana was quick to agree. She didn't want to be in that room any more than I did.

Kaine made advancing steps toward me, but I raised my palm and gave him a reassuring smile to let him know that it was okay. Although he didn't seem to like the idea, he knew he wasn't going to stop me from doing what I wanted.

Lilliana and I went out to the back of the castle, making it through the garden and over the hills, far away from where anyone might see us.

The first time I'd walked through this area, I had been trying to escape the castle. Now, here I was, trying to escape again.

The thought made me laugh a little, lifting my heavy heart.

"I'm sorry you had to go through all that." I could still feel her arm shaking, even though we'd been walking for a few minutes now.

"You seemed upset when you walked in on us in Kaine's study." Clearly, there was something else on her mind that was more important to her. "I swear to you, nothing happened. He was just trying to prove that I wasn't this past mate of his. I know that it must've looked bad from where you were standing."

So, that's what he was up to.

"I see. Thank you for clarifying that." For some reason, it still didn't make me feel better.

"It's such a beautiful day to walk through a field of wildflowers, isn't it," she said lightly, very obvious in her attempt to change the subject.

"Indeed." My response was unintentionally curt. I was just trying to find the best way toward my next question. "Lilliana, I have to know."

"My name isn't Lilliana. It's Yenisey," she corrected, furrowing her brows in distress.

I could tell she hated even being associated with the name Lilliana. "Sorry. I had no idea. So, you remember your name?"

“I do. The rest of the details are too fuzzy to really make out, but I’m trying really hard to remember. I like to think it would make everyone hate me less.” She ducked her head to the ground, wanting to hide the sadness in her eyes.

“Nobody hates you.”

Her eyes rolled over to me as she gave me a look of derision.

“Okay, fine. Maybe Kaine can come off that way, but it really has nothing to do with you. And well—I don’t hate you,” I said, and felt the truth of it.

“Really? Because you run away from me like I have some contagious skin disease every time you see me.”

“Yeah, those weren’t my most shining moments. I was just dealing with my own insecurities then, but I swear to you, I’m not going to do that again.”

“I’m relieved to hear that.” She smiled, flashing her perfect teeth at me. Even her complexion was flawless like porcelain in the rising sun.

I knew for certain now, Yenisey wasn’t someone to be wary of. She was kind and deserving of good treatment, which I planned to give her from here on out.

A shadow passed over her face briefly, and I wrote it off as just a bird that had flown over us. That was, until a thick, warm liquid splattered all over my face.

Curious as to what just happened, I looked down at my dress to find that I was covered in blood. And I wasn’t the only one either.

Yenisey’s mouth opened in horror as she began screaming out in pain. She fell forward into me, and I tried to hold her up.

Did something hit her?

I looked around and above us for anything that might explain what just happened, but I couldn’t see anything.

Overpowering dread spilled over into my chest, tightening it. I couldn’t even scream.

My mind was running so fast, and yet I couldn't conjure up a single useful thought.

Suddenly, Yenisey was jerked back within my grasp and lifted off the ground.

Something was trying to pull her away!

I held onto her wrists tightly, trying to pull her back down.

She was screaming my name, over and over again, in a blind panic.

I doubted anyone would hear us all the way out here, but still, I cried out at the top of my lungs, "Help! Someone! Please help us!"

I managed to yank her to the ground and fell down on top of her. When I looked up, there was some type of Dark Fae minion I'd never seen before.

It looked like a serpent and a man merged into one. It reached for Yenisey once again.

"No!" I jumped forward, trying to stop it, but ended up feeling a hand run through my stomach. It was so sudden that I didn't feel any pain, though I knew I was supposed to.

Pain was what let me know that I was still alive. The implication of its absence was what frightened me.

"Kaine... Edith... Help—"

"Sophia!" Yenisey's voice barely carried into my ears. She rolled me over onto my back so she could try to stop the bleeding while I looked up at the sky.

It was so beautiful today.

I forgot how nice it was to lie outside and stare up at the clouds.

The tall grass and wildflowers swayed back and forth next to me in the gentle breeze.

The greens, yellows, and purples, were all spotted with crimson.

“Get away from us!” Yenisey had picked up a stick and was swinging it at the serpent man.

Then, an arrow flew through the air and into the minion’s chest. It crashed into the field of flowers beyond my view.

When I looked up again, I found myself surrounded by people. Some of their faces I didn’t even recognize, but I was comforted by the ones that I did.

Lexi knelt by my head, her face already red from crying. “Oh, my Gods! Soph...”

Tieni stood behind her, her face pale and fear-stricken as her eyes took in all the blood covering me.

Garmilen’s professionalism had completely disappeared. He was just as disheveled as the rest of them.

Finally, Kaine pushed his way through the crowd and was now right beside me. “Soph... What—happened?”

His usual booming voice was now quivering and brittle.

“The Dark Fae ... tried to take Yenisey. I couldn’t let her be taken by them.” I shook my head slowly, my neck too stiff to do anything more.

My whole body, right down to my fingertips, was stiff and cold.

I could even tell that my heartbeat had slowed to a crawl.

My eyelids became heavy and closed slightly. It was as if I was simply about to go to sleep.

Kaine grabbed my shoulders and shook. “Don’t close your eyes. I need you to hang on for me, Soph.”

“I’ll hang on, Kaine. For as long as I can.” My voice sounded weaker now.

“Sophia!”

I heard an ethereal voice come from the sky.

It was Edith. She descended until she was floating right above my chest. “Don’t worry, Sophia. I’m here! I can—”

The instant she turned around and saw my stomach, her will seemed to cut out along with whatever words she'd been about to say.

She looked at me, then at Kaine, with sorrowful eyes. But she took a deep breath, and rolled her tiny hands together nervously.

“Okay, here goes,” she said, her hopeless gaze betraying her optimistic words as she held out her palms toward me. A glowing light began emanating from them.

“Try. Just do *whatever* you can—” Kaine gritted his teeth in a wild rage, looking back down at me in desperation.

A tingling, warm feeling replaced the numb stiffness around my stomach, but only a little. Behind Edith's frown of concentration, was the look of despondency. I knew its meaning all too well.

I looked at Kaine, who lowered his forehead and pressed it to mine as he held my hand in a vice grip. “Do you remember last night when you told me that you loved me?”

He nodded slowly, his tears now mingling with mine on my cheeks.

“Do you realize that was the first time you've ever said that to me?” As listless and cold as I was, I was grateful I could still show him a smile.

His face pressed more into me as a violent sob raked through his chest. “Is that so?” he murmured, pulling back a few inches to look at me. “We're going to have to rectify that. I'll tell you how much I love you however many times you want to hear it from now on, okay? And every second I'm not telling you, I'll show you.”

He ever so slowly lowered his face to mine again, watching my eyes the whole way, and pressed a long, tender, and salty kiss to my lips.

“And I love you, too,” I said, but my words were so soft, and almost disjointed, that I couldn't be sure that he'd heard me.

Even as every sight and sound around me became fuzzy and distorted, and darkness was seeping in and retracting sporadically, I panicked. I wanted him to know that I loved him. I needed to say it again. I needed him to know!

No... Wait! I'm not ready to go yet.

I want to tell Kaine I love him a million more times, and hear him say it back to me just as many times.

I still want to wake up tomorrow and see all my friends.

I want to go visit my father, sisters, and brothers every now and again.

I want more time to lie in the field of wildflowers with my unlikely new friend.

I want to live!

I want to live...

... to live.

... live.

The story continues I part 3 -> ssbks.com/sk3