



THE  
AWAKENING

S.E. NAUMANN

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*For my fellow mental health warriors. You deserve the right to celebrate the fact that you're alive and won yesterday's battle.*



# Pronunciation Guide

## Characters    Locations

Asena - Ah-say-nuh    Vekroth - Veh-kur-oth  
Kyllan - Ky-lan                      Soleia - Soul-aye-uh  
Ryker - Rye-ker                      Rastia - Rah-stee-uh  
Morena - Mor-eh-nuh                Alynthi - Ah-lynn-thee  
Castian - Cass-tee-an    Loritholein - Lore-tho-lee-in  
Elora - Eh-lore-uh    Nethilor - Neh-thee-lore  
Allerick - Al-ehr-ick                Elberien - El-berry-in  
Corvina - Core-vee-nuh              Drennadell - Dren-nuh-del  
Eirian- Air-ee-an                      Aramor - Air-uh-more  
Kallus - Cal-las                      Herbexia - Heir-bex-ee-uh  
Kiira - Key-rah                      Verena - Vur-ay-nuh  
Elias - El-eye-us                      Briaxoth - Bree-ax-oth  
Reyna - Ray-nuh                      Finndarya - Fin-dar-ee-uh  
Rohan - Roe-an                      Uttaven - Oot-ay-vin  
Vaella - Vie-ella                      Nuxvar - Nuh-ex-var  
Draya - Dre-uh                      Mystaria - Mist-ar-ee-uh  
Sephira - Suh-fear-uh                Zariya - Zar-ee-uh  
  
Vakna - Vah-kuch-na  
Vilande - Ville-ahn-day

# Contents

[Pronunciation Guide](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

---

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

---

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

---

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

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[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About The Author](#)

# Prologue

*300 years ago*

“I can’t believe you lot wanted to skip graduation for *this*, you know it’s just a made up story our parents were told by our grandparents when they were younger,” Halle said with an exasperated sigh.

“If you think that, then why did you come?” Ravi retorted, making a face at Halle, hopping from stone to stone deeper into the belly of the cave.

Halle shook her head in annoyance, rolling her eyes. *Of course I came with you, you’d never let me hear the end of it if I didn’t*, she thought to herself. The nine of them rarely went adventuring without one of their comrades, so naturally when Zayden’s father told them of the magikal Kyanite crystal that could be found seated deep in the belly of the cave just north of Alynthi, they had to find it. Zayden’s father seemed surprised none of them had heard of the crystal before, and noted it was a popular story told by the elders during his own childhood. The magik of the Crystal had never been seen by anyone in the Kingdom of Kinbrolds, nor in any of its nine realms, but that didn’t keep its inhabitants from speculating on it.

“Come on you lot,” Ravi called, leading the way. “We should stick together, wouldn’t want anyone getting left behind here, it’d be easy to get lost.”

Aiden smirked and said, “Yes your majesty,” his voice dripping with playful sarcasm.

He bowed deeply as he passed his friend, never missing an opportunity to jab at Ravi’s birthright. Ravi was destined to take the throne as High King, protector of the realms of the Kingdom of Kinbrolds and leader of its High Court, a fate he did not want. It was never a secret that he had no desire to lead. He felt it was not his place to rule over the other realms when he had never set foot on their lands, swam in their waters, or climbed their mountains. *Perhaps that is why he*



*suggested we find the crystal today*, Aiden thought to himself as he followed after the others deeper into the cave.

“How much farther, we have to be there soon, right? We’ve been in this bloody cave since nightfall yesterday,” Edmar complained.

He stopped to lean against the cave’s slick wall, embracing the coolness radiating from it, panting, trying to catch his breath. Wiping the sweat that threatened to drip from his brow, he whipped his head to the left when he heard a harsh voice speak.

“Oh, stop being a baby! You knew what you were getting yourself into before we started this trek,” Brynne said, not even a bead of sweat on her forehead.

It was no surprise to her friends that the treacherous terrain inside the cave had not phased her. She’d spent the past few months training for a spot in Kinbrolds’ Army, The Golden Legion, planning to enlist after graduation.

“If you’d quit whining and move your ass, we’d get there faster,” Brielle barked at him, shoving his shoulder as she passed.

Brielle had planned to follow her sister, Brynne, to the great army until a stray arrow plunged into her shoulder during one of their training exercises with the other hopefuls in their class, thus making her ineligible to enlist. The High Commander himself had told her to give up, plainly stating he would never accept a new cadet to his ranks with that severe of an injury. The group laughed in tandem as Edmar stumbled to catch his footing. The sound of a large splash followed by a girl’s squeal brought their laughter to an abrupt halt.

Aiden shook his head, chuckling to himself. “Ah yes, that’ll mean Nowell found the lovebirds. Any bets on how long it took Adelaide to drown the poor sod?”

Halle swatted at him. “Behave yourself, Aiden. You’re lucky she doesn’t know it’s you that puts him up to these antics, or you’d be on the receiving end of her vengeance.”

“Either way, we should go save the poor sap,” Brielle stated and Brynne nodded in agreement.

The group set off to find their missing comrades, venturing further and further into the cave until they came upon a large round room with three passages, each offering a different route to get to the room that held the Crystal. They called out their names, hopeful that their voices would carry through the hollow passageways of the cave. “Zayden! Adelaide! Nowell!” They called over and over.

“We’re just down here guys, seems we got a little ahead of ourselves,” Zayden called back.

“That’s all well and good mate but care to tell us which passage you went down?” Ravi called out.

Zayden looked at Adelaide, clearly lost as he’d only followed her trail of blonde curls, as she dragged him through the cave. She’d always been eager to get alone time with him whenever she could. Since he’d turned eighteen, it was a rarity that his parents let him out of battle training to spend time with their group. After all, it was planned that he would one day take over as Commander of the Golden Legion, an honored title he would inherit once his father was no longer able to uphold his duties.

Adelaide let out a heavy sigh before hollering out, “We took the one to the left, be careful though, it’s steep toward the end.”

The six friends in the cavernous room looked at each other, shrugging before carrying on. They ambled through the passageway to the left, Ravi at the front and Edmar at the rear just behind Brielle and Brynne, leaving Halle and Aiden stuck in the middle as usual. The corridor was so narrow that they had to walk single file through it. They braced themselves with careful hands against the walls which were slick with the dampness that was often found in subterranean places. The air grew colder the further they descended into the cave in search of their missing friends. Coming to the end of the corridor, they saw a very wet Nowell sitting on a rock formation near

the edge of the pool of water that contained a very displeased Adelaide and Zayden.

“Are you three going to stay in there, or are you coming to see if the Crystal feels generous enough to change our fates today?” Ravi asked, passing the trio with a sense of certainty.

He needed this crystal to be more than legend, he did not want the fate that was currently being thrust upon him by his family and their kingdom. He turned to see Aiden give him a nod, stalking off to the pool’s edge to help the couple out of the water, and get the trio back on the path. Aiden understood how Ravi felt, as his closest friend and confidant it was only natural that Aiden would be given a seat in Ravi’s court as his second in command, should his fate hold true.

The trio fell in line ahead of Halle and Aiden as they continued through the cave. Roving deeper and deeper into it, the passageways grew and shrank in size, twisting and turning until they began to see the preternatural glow of what they believed to be the enchanted lake that was said to surround the dais the Crystal sat on. The group halted, looking at each other in disbelief. If the lake was real, did that mean the Crystal was as well? If it was, could it truly give them powers none on this earth’s plane had seen? As if to read each other’s minds they all stepped forward at the same time, each of them eager to reach the top of the dais and get a glimpse of the crystal that sat atop it, rumored to be a beautiful marbled blue and white.

“Awkward,” Aiden bellowed with a smirk. “Seems none of us want what awaits us outside of this cave.” The group looked away from one another, too embarrassed to admit that Aiden was right.

“Let’s go, Dad said we had to swim through the lake to get to the dais,” Zayden explained, continuing forward until he reached the edge. The water was clear yet glowing with an ethereal light that seemingly came from nowhere and everywhere all at once. The glow appeared to pulsate in rhythm with his heartbeat, almost as if it was calling to him. He looked back at his group of friends for just a moment, and dove in.

The rest of the group rushed to the edge and waited. Adelaide studied the surface of the water while Ravi went in after him, followed by Aiden. The rest of the group remained behind to watch the surface with Adelaide. A short while later the three boys stood on the other side of the lake. No one had seen them emerge, nor had they responded when they called out to them from the water. The group shook their heads in disbelief, realizing in unison that the water truly was enchanted. All at once the remaining six of them plunged into the luminous water, racing to the other side with a newfound ferocity they had not known before. Even Edmar was giving it his all, determined not to be last.

“I can’t believe this is real!” Halle exclaimed. “That must mean the Crystal really will grant us powers!” She hopped up and down, buzzing with excitement.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, yes the lake really is enchanted, but it doesn’t mean we will find a Crystal on the dais that lies at the top of those stairs,” Ravi said, gesturing to the stairs carved into the limestone wall, snaking their way up to the platform.

“Regardless, we need a plan when we get up there, we need to be ready if the Crystal is real,” Brynne said, turning to Zayden she asked, “did your father say anything more about the legend of the Crystal? Can we touch it all at once or should we try one at a time? Is there a limit to its magik or will it grant us all newfound gifts and immortality?”

Zayden shook his head. “He didn’t say much, just that the Crystal’s magik is old. So, maybe let’s try one at a time. I doubt the thing will run out of power, it’s supposedly been hidden for a thousand years or something like that.”

“So we have a plan, we get up there and we grasp it one at a time, understood?” Ravi stated, looking at his friends as they nodded in understanding. He turned to look again at the expansive staircase that loomed above him, there had to be at least two thousand steps. “Well, we better get a move on.”

The nine of them made their way up the stairs, stopping just over halfway to brace themselves against the wall. Refusing to

be defeated by shaky legs and wobbly knees, they continued upward. Step after step their breaths grew more ragged, only the twins remained upright when they reached the top while the rest of the group crawled along the hard marble floor. Only after relishing in the delectable coolness of the air licking against their skin did the group realize where they were and what lay just ahead of them.

There, to their bewildered eyes, was a beautiful Crystal, marbled blue and white in color, flashing with a glow from deep within, shining down to the lake from the center of it. The Crystal, though not massive in size, did have many protrusions of varying heights and shapes that resembled towers. Sheer power radiated from it, wrapping around each of them. The Crystal was calling to them, beckoning them forward, pulling them like gravity. Ensnared in the siren call of the Crystal they almost forgot themselves completely, all nine of them running with an outstretched hand towards the magik, matching looks of lust and need on their faces. It was only when Halle stopped did they snap out of the trance that the Crystal had placed them in.

“We were supposed to go one at a time,” Halle murmured, her voice fluttery and light, almost as if she’d just woken from a deep sleep.

Ravi walked to where she had stopped, wrapped his arms around her, and placed a kiss on her forehead before leaning his own against hers. The group had always suspected he had chosen one of the girls to be his future queen, but they never knew who. He placed another soft kiss on her forehead and led her forward to the crystal, gesturing for her to be the first to receive her gift. Edmar opened his mouth to object, but quickly thought better of it as Ravi flashed a warning glance at him, daring Edmar to defy what he had set in motion.

Halle reached for the Crystal as she looked back at Ravi, he nodded again and she wrapped a hand around a tower on the left of the cluster. A blue light erupted from the Crystal as streams of water appeared around her, wrapping her up in waves and lifting her into the air. Halle’s eyes opened wide with surprise. She opened her mouth to scream, but only a

small gasp escaped as water rushed into her mouth. Halle's hand shot to her neck, as pain radiated from being strangled by the water, only to be soothed a moment later. Halle felt the water reach deep inside of her, feeling it course through her veins. Her entire body vibrated as the Crystal shared its power with her, the feeling both excruciating and euphoric.

The others looked on in astonishment, unable to believe what they were seeing. Her form began to change, three small webbed antennae sprouted on either side her head just atop her now pointed ears, and small gills appeared at the base of her neck. Iridescent scales began to trickle down her arms from her shoulder to the base of her elbow. The water disappeared as quickly as it came lowering Halle back to the floor of the dais, the light from the Crystal dimming back to its original state. Halle was left panting and disoriented, having felt both the most fear and adulation she'd felt in her entire lifetime.

"Well, how do you feel?" Ravi asked, giving her a once over, noting the blue ink that now poked out from the neck of her top, along with the scales and her fin-like antenna. "It seems the Crystal left its mark on you," he said, raising his hand to gesture at her new features.

Following his gaze, she looked down to her shoulder, pulling the collar of her shirt back to reveal the black ink that formed an outline of the crystal with ribbons of blue ink that danced around it swirling over her right shoulder and down back. "They're ribbons of water," Halle said, her voice low.

"Yeah that's not all it gave you, nice scales, what are you part fish now?" Aiden joked.

Halle looked down at her arms in disbelief. Embarrassed, she quickly explored the rest of her body to see what else had changed. She stopped when she felt her pointed ears. Taking a deep breath she continued up along the side of her head until she reached her new fins.

"Impossible," she whispered. She looked at Ravi. "The crystal turned me into a water nymph. I suppose things really will be different now," her voice low and distant, both unbelievably melancholy and full of wonder.

Remembering the water that coursed through her body just moments ago, she looked down at her hands in bewilderment.

“Try to do something, see what it gave you,” Edmar shouted eagerly, staring at her in awe.

Halle turned away from her friends and put all of her focus on the water that had surrounded her moments ago. With closed eyes, she stretched her arms out in front of her and willed whatever power she had been given to erupt from her core. She stood there for what felt like years, almost ready to give up. But suddenly, she felt a cool sliver of water slide down her arms. Halle’s eyes flew open to find streams of water dancing down her arms to her palms, forming a ball of water, cool in her hands. The action, though completely new to her, felt like an old friend greeting her after a long time away. She felt *whole*, as if the Crystal’s magik had reunited her with a part of herself that had been missing. Tears of awe and joy came to her eyes.

“Oh shit, is that real?” Aiden asked in disbelief.

Halle shook her head yes as she lowered her arms and walked toward her friends, water ball in hand. She flung the ball at Aiden, “I don’t know, you tell me.” She said, laughing at Aiden’s shocked expression as the water ball hit him in the chest. Turning back to Ravi, she said, “So, who’s next?”

Ravi made to step forward, but was cut off by Edmar, who greedily insisted “that’d be me.” Ravi and Halle exchanged a baffled look before looking at the others who were just as confused about Edmar’s behavior.

Once again the Crystal emitted that bright blue light as Edmar received his gift, only this time streaks of ice curled around him, not water as Halle had experienced moments ago. The group watched intently, as Edmar’s face showed similar emotions to the ones that had crossed Halle’s during her time with the Crystal. Once the Crystal’s light released him, he found his form had also changed, not to a water nymph but to that of a frost elf. His once rounded ears were now pointed as well, frost began creeping its way along his cheekbones, and his amber eyes transformed to a daunting blue with a light

glow to them. After inspecting his new form, he followed Halle's lead, and immediately stretched his arms out, willing the power to show itself. Ice crept down his arms and burst from his palms in a long stream as it pounded against the wall in front of him, spreading out and adhering itself to it. Pleased with himself he rejoined his friends and silently watched as they too received their gifts.

One by one, each of them grasped a different tower of the Crystal, and were granted an elemental power and immortality, along with a fate that would change their world forever. Brynne now had the ability to manipulate the earth and fashion whatever she wished from it, mountains, hills, or buildings, the possibilities were endless for her. She learned that her abilities didn't stop there, she could also grow and manipulate plants, not just flowers but trees as well, as she had done when testing her power, growing a large oak in the middle of the dais. Her sister Brielle received the oddest gift of all, the ability to change shape. She could manipulate her physical self into whatever she wished. To test her powers she changed into a replica of Ravi, voice and all. Naturally he didn't find it as hilarious as the rest of the group and she quickly changed back to herself. Adelaide received a gift the others envied, she could now manipulate time, something she found out herself when she tested her power and learned what the others would be gifted before even they knew. Zayden could call upon lightning whenever he wished, while Ravi could conjure fire from thin air. Nowell went next, receiving the ability to control the air around them, giving them more or taking it away, or even bringing about a slight breeze to cool them off. Aiden went last, being gifted the ability to control and defy gravity. He levitated above the dais as Halle tried to hit him with water balls, laughing and losing focus, he brought his friends up to join him.

Once back on the ground each of them looked at the others in their group, their forms now different from how they'd entered the cave and they all now bore the mark of their gift as well. Unable to hide it, they decided to come forward about what they'd done that day. It was decided they would go to Ravi's parents last, as he would suffer the worst of the



consequences. The group's parents reacted better than they had expected, until they got to the castle. The King was livid, furious at their disobedience. He had strictly forbidden his son from setting foot in the cave. The Queen however, was more understanding, and quite optimistic about the whole thing. Their son, the crown prince, was now immortal, and was gifted the power to control fire with expansive midnight teal wings and black horns sure to strike fear in their enemies. The Queen made the King see reason and it was then decided. Each year after the nine academies held their graduations, each class would travel through the cave, up to the dais, and receive their gift. This event would come to be called *The Awakening*.

# CHAPTER 1

*Asena*

*He turned and stalked off toward the small building just to the left of the grounds, his black hair gleaming with sweat. “Where are you going?” I asked.*

*His shoulders tensed at the sound of my voice. “I’ve just got to grab something. I will be right back; you’ll be fine, Asena,” he grumbled, almost too softly for me to hear. I watched his form disappear into the building before I went back to practicing my defensive stance, stalking toward the center of the training arena.*

*“Okay remember what he told you,” I said aloud. “Feet shoulder-width apart, knees bent, hands up, weight forward.” I got in and out of my stance until I lost count of how many times I had done it. Bored, I sauntered back toward the building he had walked into.*

*Two hooded figures blocked my path, obscuring my view of anything but the two of them. Sheer terror shot through me as I turned and ran in the opposite direction. The figures did not follow me. I ran as hard as I could, constantly checking over my shoulder to see if they were pursuing me. But, they remained stationary as I ran further and further away, only stopping to catch my breath once I could no longer see them.*

*All at once darkness came for me. The hooded figures appeared in front of me, reaching for my arms. "Get away from me!" I screamed into the cloud of silence surrounding us, breaking free from their grasp. I ran from them only to crash into nothing. I clawed at the space in front of me trying to escape to no avail. Their powers were foreign to me, ones of darkness, conjuration, and invisibility.*

*I must escape, I thought to myself. Find a way out of here, you are smart. Look for the weakness in the power, they all have one. I searched until I hit another wall of nothingness, and again and again. The realization set in that I was trapped, a cage built of invisible walls surrounding me. "Let me out!" I screamed as I banged on the walls of my cage*

*One of the figures approached the cage. "You belong to me now girl. I suggest you get used to that idea."*

"Asena!" My mother shook me awake. "It happened again, didn't it? I could hear your screams from the garden." I lurched forward and sobbed in her arms. "I know you are scared, dear. I promise your father and I will never let anything happen to you while you are here. We would not knowingly send you into the Awakening if we thought it would endanger you in any way. Tell me about them, what happens in your night visions?"

I had been hesitant to tell her, or anyone for that matter, except Kyllan, and he was sworn to secrecy. I sat up, nervously biting my lip, a habit I had inherited from my father. If I was going to get out of the Awakening, I had to tell someone other than Kyllan. I knew this, and yet, I was still hesitant to tell my mother. I did not want her to worry, she and Father had been through so much already, having lost one child with no warning. I still wasn't sure what happened, only that I had once had a brother, one that I'd never met. Mother always said he was taken in a storm of ice and darkness on an unusually cool summer afternoon, and Father well, Father never talked about it. Whenever I asked, it drove him out of the house for days, so I stopped asking, but it didn't stop me from wondering what really happened to the brother I'd never met.

"Okay," I said. "But you have to promise you won't worry for me."

I looked up at my mother. Her red hair stuck to her forehead, damp with sweat from working in our garden, two intricate antlers sprouted from atop her head. She just shook her head in understanding, causing a dainty purple flower to shake loose from where it had been sheathed behind one of her pointed ears just a

moment before. I began to recount the night visions that had haunted me every night for a month, since my eighteenth birthday, a fact not lost on me; I knew it had to be more than coincidence.

I searched her bright green eyes for some sort of worry, I only saw rage. “When did the night visions start?” She asked, trying to remain composed.

“The first one came the night I turned eighteen, and one each month since,” I replied, lowering my voice before continuing, “They have, however, become more frequent as my twenty-fifth birthday approaches.”

“I can’t believe you kept this from us for six years, Asena,” she said, throwing her hands up in disbelief. “We need to tell your father. He will be home before you are due to leave for school tomorrow. You might as well fetch Kyllan, he will need to be here for this conversation.” She wiped the tears from my face, placed a kiss on the top of my head and paused at the door. “Do actually go fetch him, don’t send an origami letter, this is going to need a personal touch.” With that she left the room.

I sighed as I got out of bed and walked over to my closet, pulling out a simple green top and my brown leather pants father bought me for training. If I was going to leave the house today I might as well take my bow to practice shooting apples from trees along the way. Archery is the most prized skill among the elven folk of Herbestia after all. I swiftly dressed and slid my feet into my leather boots, lacing them with care as they were heavily worn and we weren’t due to go to the capital for another few days. I arranged my hair in a quick braid over my shoulder and ambled down the hall to the kitchen. I knew I would find Mother there brewing a pot of tea for the two of us.

“Mother, why does Kyllan need to be here?” I inquired. “He already knows about my night visions.”

I made my way to the cupboard, quickly opening the door and grabbed two teacups, setting them on the counter near the stove where she stood. She cast me a sidelong glance and returned her focus to the tea kettle. My mother was truly striking, even with the muted green ink that peered out slightly from the collar of her woven top. It was nice to see her hair billowing down her back for once, as she typically wore it in a bubble braid when she was milling about the house.

“I am very aware that you have told Kyllan about them, Asena. He told me that you were having night visions weeks ago, but he also informed me he was sworn to secrecy as to what they contained. I understand why now, but he is just as much a part of this as you, due to the pact you made with him when you were eight. His fate is tied to yours, at least until after the Awakening,” she stated matter of factly, taking the teapot off the burner and pouring the piping hot amber liquid into our cups while I added a cube of sugar to each.

“I just know that Father isn’t going to react the best and I’m worried for Kyllan,” I admitted.

I would not be lying if I said there was always something that connected Kyllan and I that transcended the bounds of friendship. I would not say there was necessarily anything romantic about the connection, but my need to protect him was always there, and I knew it was the same for him. Neither of us knew what it was or what it meant, nor did we ever acknowledge it. But something told me our parents knew more of the connection than they let on, hopefully we would gain answers soon.

“I would not worry about Kyllan dear, your father knows about the night visions as well. He was there when Kyllan told me. Your father was grateful to Kyllan that day. It is the only time I have ever seen him humbled by another male,” she said as she stirred our tea with a quick flick of her wrist. “Finish your tea sweet girl. Then fetch Kyllan, he will be anxious to hear this news, I am sure.” And she walked from the room, off to sit in her favorite reading chair, signaling the end to her morning routine.

I plopped down at our well loved wooden table, drinking deeply from my cup, taking a moment to embrace the peace the morning always seemed to bring. Staring around our quaint cottage I truly began to appreciate the niceties I never quite paid attention to. I would miss the sandstone colored rock that made up our walls, and the vines woven around the solid oak archways that lead from room to room. The soothing sound of water trickling into the small pond just outside our home that overflowed from the stream when it rained, as it did last night, would soon be replaced by silence.

*I cannot believe he told them!* I thought to myself as I took another sip of my tea. It was no surprise that Mother had strayed from her typical raspberry tea this morning. I reveled in the taste of lavender on my tongue, just what I needed. *Oh well, at least I will finally get some answers behind the night visions and what they mean.* I quickly gulped down the last of my tea and headed toward

the door of our cottage, stopping in the foyer to sling my quiver full of practice arrows over my head so it lay across my back and picked up my bow. Both the quiver and bow had been a gift from my parents for my eighteenth birthday. I didn't have much practice with either, outside the few training sessions I'd had with Father over the years, and relished any opportunity to hone my aim.

"I'm off to fetch Kyllan," I yelled over my shoulder so Mother knew she would be alone, closing the door behind me.

# CHAPTER



## 2

*Asena*

I embraced the warmth of the sunlight against my cheek as I made my way past the willow that grew next to the pond behind our home. I stopped briefly to toss a bit of feed to my koi that Kyllan gave me when I turned twenty. They had grown tremendously over the past four years, my favorite started as the smallest of the group, I always did have a soft spot for the underdog. I flung another handful of feed into the pond and watched as the white and orange of their fins neared the surface. I tossed my bow over my shoulder and turned toward the front of our home, walking through the gate that crossed our front walk, closing it behind me.

The journey from our cottage to Kyllan's was one I'd made hundreds of times over the years, however, today was different. I could not enjoy all that our quaint town had to offer. I didn't stop at the small market along the way to see what new vendors there were this week or gossip with my favorite baker. Our market was nice and great for daily needs but if we needed anything beyond a basic household item we had to travel to the capital of our realm, to the city of Verena. We were fortunate to live close to the capital of our realm, Herbexia, in the town of Peoria. Kyllan and I would often make the day-long trek to our capital together with one of our

parents to get new clothing for school, new training leathers, or supplies for Mother's garden or Father's hunting.

I continued down the all too familiar gravel road to Kyllan's home in a daze. I didn't notice when I'd passed by the apple orchard I'd planned to stop at, I was only pulled from my trance by the sound of wings beating overhead. My gaze drifted towards the sky, a pair of gryffins flew above me. Even though they flew over our realm every year I would never get used to seeing the sight. Gryffins were very rare in our kingdom, hunted down long ago and used in the great battle that ended in our kingdom's realms being able to govern themselves. King Ravi banished one of his own friends, Edmar, after he betrayed him and killed Queen Halle and started the rebellion against the throne. It was always Edmar's end goal to take the throne from Ravi. Edmar's power that of ice and Ravi's that of fire, it seemed as though Edmar was made to lead the rebellion.

Edmar made it his mission to hunt down every gryffin he could find, as they were tall fearsome beasts that The Golden Legion used as their steeds in battle. Their heads and bodies were the form of a lion, and towered over even the tallest elf at 10 feet tall with expansive feathered wings to carry them across the realms. Edmar, knowing the battle had been lost, fled with what was left of his army to a distant land. Eventually some of the gryffins returned, and a mated pair was given as a gift by King Ravi to each of the nine realms the day he demolished his throne with dragon fire and renounced his crown, giving the realms their freedom. Now each year, on the night before the Summer Solstice, the gryffins travel to the mountain of Idris on the Isle of Light to mate and restore their species back to its former glory. With the Summer Solstice just a fortnight away, the pairs would be coming in more frequently in the coming days, a sight that Kyllan and I always watched together.

I watched the pair disappear over the tall oak trees in the distance and returned my gaze forward, continuing down the road toward Kyllan's cottage. My thoughts were alternating between the conversation with Mother about my night visions and the hope that I could avoid the Awakening. Though it wouldn't be strange for a vilande to choose not to participate and remain unawakened, I knew in my heart that wasn't a possibility for me. Being the daughter of the Commander of The Brokenstone had its perks, especially at the market or when we ventured to the capital. But it had its downsides too. The crushing weight of responsibility that I was currently feeling was a reminder of that. I arrived at Kyllan's cottage before I was able to shake the thoughts clouding my mind, and I stood there



for a moment taking in the view of his family's home. It was a sight I had seen too many times to count, but in that moment, I needed the distraction.

The cottage truly was beautiful in an effortless way. Vines of ivy extended from the small flower bed up the north facing wall, adding beauty without taking over. Lilies grew along the cobblestone path leading to the large oak door on the front of their home. I smiled fondly, remembering the day Kyllan's father, Allerick, had finished placing the stones. The walkway had been a gift to Kyllan's mother, Corvina, for the Summer Solstice. Kyllan's family never cared for frills or doted over decoration. They were Herbexian at heart, enjoying all that came from the Earth and allowing nature to decorate as it saw fit. Both Kyllan's parents were born and raised in Herbexia's capital of Verena, unlike my own that came from two completely different realms. Mother hailed from the heart of Vekroth to the east and Father from the broken islands of Mystaria to the north, neither of them spoke much of their homelands or families these days.

Shaking myself from my deepened thoughts, I ambled up the cobblestone path to the door. Kyllan opened it with a smile as I raised my fist to knock, which quickly faded as he took in my face, void of emotion. His lips became a thin line, his brow furrowing in worry, a look I knew all too well. I sighed, not ready for the conversation that was coming.

"You had another one, didn't you?" He asked, his voice not much more than a whisper.

I shook my head. "Yes, only this time was different. I could feel myself trapped, Mother heard me screaming from the garden and rushed inside." I turned my gaze down towards his bare feet. "I had to tell her, Kyllan."

"Shit." He sighed and stepped aside, motioning me to come in. He grabbed my bow and quiver, leaning them both against the wall next to his own. Pulling me in for a quick hug, he placed a gentle kiss atop my head before releasing me.

"I'm sorry. I know that's the last thing you wanted. How did she take it?" He asked as we walked toward the kitchen.

"Actually, that's why I'm here," I admitted. "I've been instructed to fetch you. Apparently, Mother wants to talk with Father about the whole thing and says you need to be there."

He stopped and spun around just short of the doorway leading to their quaint kitchen. The inside of their home matched the outside, simple and decorated with gifts Mother Earth had offered them. Allerick had added a few touches of his own here and there around their home, gifts for Corvina for the Winter Solstice. The most recent being the intricate carvings of roses and vines around the door frame of the kitchen.

“Did you hear anything I just said?” he asked, clearly annoyed, as he turned and continued toward the pantry.

I followed after him and made myself comfortable at the kitchen table, looking down at the floor, embarrassed that I had let myself get lost in thought again. “I’m sorry Kyllan. I promise it wasn’t intentional, I seem to be having trouble focusing today. My conversation with Mother really has me distracted and the Mother only knows how Father is going to react to all of this. I’m guessing you’d like to know how you fit into all of this and why Mother wants you there?”

“I mean yea, Ase, you kind of blindsided me with this one.” He milled about the kitchen fixing himself breakfast and a cup of tea for the both of us before sitting down across the table from me. “Don’t get me wrong here, I’m happy you finally told someone other than me, but I didn’t expect to be a part of a family discussion about it.”

I plopped a cube of sugar in my tea, stirring the liquid with my spoon before taking a long sip. I smirked at the familiar taste, lavender, his intuition when it came to me never failed. “I know Ky, trust me, I’m just as surprised as you are. But I’d like to see you go against Mother’s wishes and live to tell the tale, we both know how stubborn she can be.”

He didn’t say anything as he brought another bite of oatmeal up to his mouth, staring at me with squinted eyes. I couldn’t help but giggle at his frustration. I didn’t know what Mother had planned but I knew better than to argue with her wishes, Kyllan did too, a lesson we both learned at a very young age. He finished his breakfast in silence as I quietly sipped my tea, neither of us wanting to deal with the conversation that we needed to have.

“Ky, I know I’m asking a lot here. I don’t think either of us imagined we’d ever actually need to use the pact, much less extend it beyond the ceremony” I said, looking into his hazel eyes.

He ran a hand through his short blonde hair and let out a sigh. “I know Ase. I just, I don’t know what any of this means. I guess I just

thought your night visions would eventually end after The Awakening and we would carry on like normal.” He got up to place his dishes in the sink, turning around to lean against the counter, “I never expected them to mean there was something more at work here.”

I stood up to go over to him when the door opened, interrupting our conversation. “Kyllan, come give me a hand, would you?” Allerick called from the door as he heaved a sack of potatoes inside.

“Be right there, Father,” he called down the hall. “This conversation isn’t over,” Kyllan said, his voice lowered so his father couldn’t hear. He brushed past me to go help his father.

“I’ll come help as well, sir,” I exclaimed.

“Asena, that’s not necessary, dear. Though it is always a welcome pleasure to see you,” Allerick said as he extended his arms bringing me in for a hug. “Corvina is out back trying to find a place for her new tomato plants if you want to go help her. I know she always enjoys your company.”

I nodded and made my way towards the back of the house smiling as I rounded the corner and spotted her. Kyllan’s mother really was a sight of beauty. Her raven-colored hair hung loose around her shoulders, flowing in the breeze as she stood contemplating where in her ever-growing garden to place her newest plants. The antlers that adorned the top of her head, like every other inhabitant of Herbexia that had gone through the awakening, were different from my mother’s. Hers were slightly shorter and more spiraled where my mother’s were more curved. She turned towards the house and smiled when she caught sight of me, waving me over.

“Kyllan didn’t tell us you were stopping by today,” Corvina exclaimed, wrapping me up in a hug. “Not that we ever mind a bit to see you, Asena. I hope you’re up for helping me in the garden today.”

“I wasn’t planning on stopping by, but Mother sent me to fetch Ky. I’m afraid I can’t stay long, she’ll be expecting us back sooner rather than later. I’m happy to help for a little while, at least until they’re done unloading the cart,” I explained with a half-hearted smile.

“Oh, alright then, we better get to it,” she said, trying to hide the disappointment in her voice. She walked to the other side of the garden and tilted her head ever so slightly. “I think I want to add

them to this row here, next to the cabbage we planted earlier this summer. What do you think?"

"That would work, the cabbages shouldn't get so big they overtake the tomatoes," I agreed, kneeling on the ground to begin making space for the new plants.

"Ase!" Kyllan yelled from the corner of the house, my head snapping up at the sound of his voice. "We better get going, wouldn't want to keep your mother waiting too long."

I hugged Corvina and headed toward the front of the house to meet Kyllan and head back home. He stood clad in his dark brown leather vest, a white shirt peeked out from the shoulders and ran down his muscular arms. He donned a pair of matching leather pants and boots, his quiver and bow draped across his back. With an outstretched arm he handed me my beloved bow and quiver along with a sheet of enchanted parchment.

"Best to tell Elora that we are headed back, I added a few arrows to your quiver as well. I thought we could make a stop or two along the way for a bit of target practice." He beamed at me, his hazel eyes full of understanding and patience.

I smiled back at him, taking my bow and quiver, slinging them over my shoulder in a motion that was already familiar, before taking the enchanted parchment. Kyllan pulled a pen from the satchel that hung at his side and handed it to me. I flashed him a look of thanks as I wrote a quick note to my mother.

*Mother,*

*Have just fetched Kyllan and we are headed back home. We are making a few stops along the way for target practice. Don't worry, we will be safe. Love you.*

*-Asena*

I quickly folded the letter into a wolf and held it in my hands as I whispered, "travel fast and far my sweet." Once I'd spoken the words of incantation, I blew gently on the delicate paper. At once the wolf sprang to life, leaping into the air, leaving a sparkling magik trail from the enchantment in its wake. I turned to Kyllan and asked, "Are we ready?"

He nodded and started down the road toward my home, waving goodbye over his shoulder to his parents. I hugged Allerick and followed behind him, sprinting to catch up



# CHAPTER

## 3

*Asena*

We walked most of the way home with stolen glances at one another, each of us waiting for the other to break the uncomfortable silence hanging thick between us. I wanted to say something, anything to drown out the quiet, but understood he needed time to process through the morning's events. Kyllan had been there for me after every night vision recently, each progressively worse than the last. None had left me as terrified as the one Mother woke me from before dawn this morning.

My mind wandered back to the conversation with Mother this morning, searching the depths of my mind for memories of whispers and conversations between her and Father when they thought I'd gone to bed. I stopped in my tracks when I ventured to the thoughts I'd shoved aside this morning. *What exactly did Mother mean when she said that Kyllan's fate was tied to mine?* The thought of him in that cage, trapped with me, was enough to send me into tears.

I moved away from the road and headed toward a small clearing nearby. I didn't look back to see if Kyllan followed me or not, frankly I hoped he hadn't. As I ventured into the clearing I made sure to keep an eye on the treeline, watching for any signs of movement alerting me to the presence of the creatures that lived within the woods. I situated myself on the ground in the middle of a small patch of wildflowers on the north side of the meadow. I leaned

back on my elbows with my legs outstretched, my face pointed towards the sky, letting the sunlight kiss my cheeks. My ears perked up at the sound of the water traveling in a stream nearby, the cool breeze captured wisps of hair that came loose from my braid causing them to tickle the back of my neck. Having found comfort in the beauty of the clearing, I laid on my back and let my worries go for the moment, relishing in the sheer happiness of the calmness of nature that surrounded me. I let the awareness of the ground below me recenter my thinking. I couldn't help but feel silly, that I was worrying over nothing.

It was some time before I realized Kyllan was leaning against a large willow tree nearby, only coming closer once he saw me look his way. "I made it about thirty steps down the road before I realized you'd disappeared on me," he huffed, giving me a once over, checking to make sure I was okay physically before sitting next to me. "Whatever happens Asena, it's not your fault. You didn't trick me into making that pact, we both agreed. Hell, even your parents didn't stop it. I can't imagine either of them would have let it happen if it would have put us in danger."

I propped myself back up on my elbows and followed his movements as he sat next to me in the patch of wildflowers. "What happens if I end up in that cage, Ky? What happens if you end up there with me?" I whispered, afraid to speak the words too loudly. I turned on my side placing my head in my hand, still propped up on my elbow. "I feel silly worrying this much over a dream, but it has to mean something if it keeps becoming more vivid each night, right?" I asked, wiping the tears from my cheeks.

Kyllan plucked a daisy from the ground as he sat there thinking of what to say next. With an outstretched hand he tucked the yellow daisy behind my left ear, a stark contrast to my red hair. He stood and offered me his hand, "let's go find out. I'm sure your mother will send the entire village searching for us if we aren't there soon."

I offered him a half-hearted smile as I took his hand and got up. He moved aside, letting me lead the way, which I suspected was to make certain I didn't venture off again. I let out a small giggle as we headed back toward the road to return home



The sight of my family's cottage made us stop dead in our tracks. Was it always that big, or did the unknown fate that lay beyond the door make it seem to loom over us? Our home was one of the largest in our small town, a gift from our High Lady, Selene, to my father when he became commander of The Brokenstone, Herbexia's army. The ornate stones on the outside of our home were woven with strands of jasmine and hyacinth crawling toward the red clay shingles that made up our roof. The flowers were Mother's touch, always using the gift given to her by The Crystal during her Awakening Ceremony many years ago.

The flicker of a shadow in the upstairs window of Father's study was enough to bring my thoughts back to the present. I opened the door with my arm outstretched behind me, reaching for Kyllan. Father's voice carried through the house sending a shudder through me. He was upset about something. Whether it be the hunt or my night visions I didn't know, but the knowledge that I would soon find out sent a shiver down my spine. We took our bows and quivers off and leaned them against the wall in the foyer then ventured through the house quietly until we reached the foot of the stairs.

"I'm home!" I called out, grabbing the worn wooden banister. "Kyllan is here as well. Do you want us to join you upstairs or shall we wait for you to come down?" I was frozen in place at the base of the stairs. A bead of sweat trickled down my neck as I waited anxiously for a reply.

"We will be down shortly, Asena," My mother called, "why don't you put on some tea for us dear, we have much to discuss."

With that, she closed the door to Father's study, their voices becoming muffled. I tried my best to eavesdrop, but it was a fruitless effort. Kyllan had already wandered off to the kitchen, knowing from experience that I wouldn't be too far behind. He had no trouble making himself at home here, having spent hours upon hours milling about our home over the years.

I found him sitting at the table, a cup of tea already in his hand. "You'd think you'd have learned by now that snooping is impossible when they are determined not to let you hear them." He chuckled into his teacup, taking a sip before shaking his head in disbelief.

I stuck my tongue out at him and walked toward the cupboard, grabbing three teacups before closing the door and making my way back to the table. The sound of footsteps on the stairs thundered through the house as my parents made their way down. I finished pouring our tea as I saw the image of my father. He barely fit

through the doorway, ducking so he wouldn't hit his head. His sage green and deep brown hunting leathers fit tightly over his chest, starting to unravel at the seams due to the breadth of his shoulders. Wisps of deep green and black ink adorned the left side of his neck, barely visible beneath his hair that hung loose around his shoulders, white as the snow on a harsh winter day. His antlers were the largest of our kind, standing tall and proud atop his head they were a brighter color than most, bleached by the sunlight he spent so much time in.

He turned to say something to Kyllan and his blue eyes pierced my soul, they were swollen and red. My father, this beast of a man, had been crying. My shoulders slumped and I looked down at my feet, tucking my arms behind my back.

I looked up only when I saw the toe of his shoes come into view in front of my own. "Asena, look at me," his voice steady and forgiving. He grabbed my chin and tilted it upward, a single tear rolled down my cheek. "No more tears my sweet girl. We will face this together, all of us," he gestured at Mother and Kyllan behind him. "While these night visions may very well mean nothing, your mother and I have decided it best that we prepare you both before The Awakening next month."

"But sir, I'm afraid I still don't understand, Elora told Ase this morning that my fate was tied to hers," Kyllan explained to my father. "I don't mind helping her at all, that was part of our pact. My brain has been on overdrive trying to figure out how we are tied together beyond the pact since she told me this morning. I guess I'm just looking for some answers, I think we both are," Kyllan finished, gesturing to me. He drank the last of his tea before pouring himself more, adding a cube of sugar to his cup and stirring the warm amber liquid with his spoon.

My parents exchanged a look before my mother sighed. "I should explain," she began. She took my hand and looked at my father, who gave her a reassuring nod. Inhaling deeply, she continued to explain. "I made a similar pact, years ago, with a girl who I thought to be my friend. Morena and I were inseparable, not unlike the two of you. Growing up in Soleia together we quickly became friends, even graduated from Sunniva Academy together before our Awakening Ceremony," She paused, her eyes gliding from me to my father and back again. Father took her hand in his, stroking his thumb across her fingers in reassurance.



She picked up her tea cup and drank deeply before continuing. “Morena was always competitive by nature, so I shouldn’t have been surprised when she broke our vow during The Awakening. It was nearing the end of the second day in our trek through the cave, I was getting tired and started to fall behind the others. She was insistent that we keep going, wanting to keep up with the group. She told me that I should be embarrassed of myself for making her look bad and slowing down. I sat down to rest, and we got into a huge argument. She did everything in her power to make me get up and carry on with her, when it became clear I wasn’t moving for quite some time she let her anger get the best of her. Morena yanked the metal cuff off her wrist that sealed our vow and crushed it beneath her feet before storming off into the belly of the cave, leaving me behind. The next day I found Morena at the base of the stairwell that led to the dais where The Crystal set. I offered her a hand to help her up and she simply spat at me. I continued alone, reaching the top of the stairwell I strode across the dais and received my gift.” She took another sip of her tea and glanced between Kyllan and me.

“How does what happened between you and Morena affect me and Kyllan?” I asked, looking at my mother incredulously.

“Morena never made it out of the cave Asena,” my father said, uttering the words my mother could not. “It’s why your mother has never once removed that copper cuff. She is afraid if she takes it off the Mother will punish her too.”

I couldn’t believe it, a silly pact made between young friends was viewed as binding in the eyes of the Mother. Did this mean I was attached to Kyllan forever? Is this why there was always something more between us than friendship? For the first time since we’d sat down, I turned to look at Kyllan, he looked like he was going to be sick. He caught my stare and placed his hand over mine, running his thumb over my knuckles in reassurance, similar to how Father had run his finger over Mother’s only moments before. I turned back to speak to Mother when Father got up from the table and left the room, my gaze trailing after him.

My head snapped back to Mother when she spoke, “your father is just fetching something from his study. We thought it was time for you two to have something we had forged for you years ago.” She smiled sadly, the shadow of Morena’s memory in her eyes. “I’m sorry I did not tell you sooner, Asena, you as well, Kyllan. I feel Roarke and I have let you two down in that regard, we just couldn’t

let you go into that cave without knowing what happened one hundred years ago during my ceremony.”

Kyllan was the first of us to speak. “You haven’t let us down or failed us, Elora. You have better prepared us for what is to come and what we should expect once inside the cave.” He paused to look at me, I gave him a nod, so he knew I agreed. “Ma’am, you and Roarke have always been like a second set of parents to me, I feel what you have told your daughter and me better prepares us for the cave than any lecture or history book could.” He rose from his chair and placed a hand on my mother’s shoulder giving it a reassuring pat before continuing to the stove to prepare more tea.

“I have to agree with Kyllan, Mother, but...” I hesitated, biting my bottom lip. “I have a few questions about the pact.” I looked down at my hands as I picked at my cuticles with my fingernails. I didn’t want to ask these questions in front of Kyllan, but he deserved the answers as much as I did. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves when Father entered the room.

He tossed a small leather pouch on the table and reclaimed the seat next to Mother. “Don’t let me stop you sweet girl, ask your questions.” He took my hands in his own, knowing his presence always settled my nerves when they ran rampant.

I looked at Kyllan then back at Mother. “So, our pact is more of a vow?” I asked.

“Yes,” she confirmed. She reached into the leather pouch on the table and produced two cuffs fashioned out of green metal, holding them up. The late morning sunlight poured in through the kitchen window, reflecting off of the cuffs in a preternatural way that gave them the illusion of glowing. “These represent the vow you and Kyllan made to one another.” She handed the thinner of the two to me. The cuff really was beautiful, the once silver metal had been magikally altered in the forging process to the forest green it now was. A vine of ivy made of blackened steel adorned the middle of my band, while Kyllan’s featured them wrapped around the top and bottom. “These are imbued with the magik of the Mother, as all vow cuffs are. Once you decide to put them on, you can not take them off until your vow is complete or until one of you frees the other. Should you decide to make a second vow before the first is complete, you can not remove the cuff until it is complete, and so on.”

Kyllan strode back across the kitchen to the table with the fresh pot of tea, the scent of honeysuckle and lemon filled my heart with

warmth and comfort. “I thought we could use a bit of a change, I know honeysuckle is a favorite of yours, Asena, and yours as well, Elora.” He retrieved his cuff and stared at it incredulously. “If we put these on, does that mean we have accepted our vow to keep one another safe through the cave?”

“Yes, that is the idea,” Father answered. Kyllan moved to put his cuff on, and Father snapped his fingers, causing the cuff to fly across the room. “You have always been like a son to me boy, but you will not take on this burden without speaking to my daughter first, for it is not yours alone to carry. It would do you well to remember whose house you are in, do not put my child in danger because of your own arrogance,” Father roared, snapping again causing both cuffs to return to the pouch from which they came. “Elora and I will hold onto these until we feel you are ready to wield them.”

“You mean I have a choice; I don’t have to tie my fate to Kyllan’s?” I asked in disbelief. “And if we do choose to wear them, we are only tied together so long as a vow lies between us?”

Kyllan looked at me, hurt hanging heavy in his eyes as he stood and made his way to the door. Mother waved a hand and latched it, preventing him from leaving.

“And just where do you think you’re going, Kyllan? We aren’t finished here,” she said.

“You may not be, but I am. I can’t protect your daughter as I agreed to when we were children, and she doesn’t want me around,” he scoffed, motioning in my direction.

“That is not what I said, Kyllan and you know it. I don’t want you tied to me for the rest of your life. Can you honestly tell me that you would be happy? You’d never be able to have a life of your own, what happens if the crystal gives us different gifts and we end up in separate realms? Or worse, what if my night visions come to fruition? What then? I have already told you I don’t want you in that cage with me. I’m only being practical. You are my *best friend*; I would never intentionally hurt you or hold you back from your own life. I’d hope you would grant me that same courtesy.” With tears of hurt and anger stinging the edge of my eyes, I stormed from the kitchen toward Mother’s library.

# CHAPTER



## 4

*Asena*

I sat with my legs against my chest, my arms locking them in place. The book I'd plucked from one of the shelves dangled loosely in my grip; my mind too unfocused to concentrate on the words it contained. My instincts brought me to the chair I sat in now for a reason. It was the one place in the house that I could always come to when I needed to free my thoughts. Mother fashioned it from my favorite spot on the small stone wall that overlooked the pond next to our cottage. The cushion was made of moss from the side of a nearby stump where Father always sat while we fished.

A soft knock on the door told me that she had come to check on me. I didn't get up but instead merely glared at the door, hoping her intuition would tell her I wanted to be left alone.

"I brought you some tea, Asena." I didn't answer. "I'll just leave it outside the door then." I heard her set the tray on the floor followed by the sound of her soft footsteps fading away.

*I can't believe Kyllan is acting this way. Why is he so ready to throw his future away on me? I thought to myself. Does he have feelings for me? That would definitely shed some light on not only the reasoning behind his actions, but several other things as well. Though, if he really felt that way why wouldn't he tell me? The*

questions continued swirling around my mind until I could no longer stand it.

Another knock sounded at the door, too harsh to be Mother again. “Asena, we need to talk,” Father’s voice boomed through the door. I remained still as he opened the door. He made his way into the room, stepping over the tea tray left by Mother and sat in the oversized chair across the room. Grumbling, I got up to close the door, whatever conversation was to transpire between us, it wasn’t one I wanted Kyllan to hear.

“Before we begin, I want you to know I am on your side, Asena, your mother as well. Whatever you decide, we will support you.” He looked at me with a hint of sadness behind his sympathetic eyes. “You need to understand that if you choose not to fulfill your vow to Kyllan, he can not help you in the cave.”

“Why would I need his help? All our lives we were led to believe nothing dangerous is in the cave. Were you all lying to us?” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “Hmm, Father, are you and Mother hiding something, our teachers and his parents as well? Why would I *need* Kyllan looking out for me if I wasn’t in danger? What are you all keeping from me, from us?”

Tears started to fall from my eyes, I felt myself bordering on hysterics and a part of me knew I was worrying over something I knew to be false. I just couldn’t fight the feeling that I was being lied to, whether they knew it or not. Father strode across the room and scooped me up, wrapping me in his arms to carry me back to the oversized chair with him.

“There has never been anything that lies in the cave that was dangerous.” He stroked my hair in an attempt to soothe me and quiet my tears. “However, this year marks the three hundredth anniversary of the original Awakening when the crystal granted the gifts of fire, ice, earth, shifting, lightning, air, time, gravity, and water to the original High Lords and Ladies of the nine realms.”

“I know this, trust me. Rather than actually learning at Greenbriar Academy all we have been doing is celebrating the anniversary,” I interrupted contemptuously, opening my mouth to continue but stopping short as Father’s glare bore into me.

“The army leaders are adding trials in the cave, Asena. We weren’t to tell you, we were sworn to secrecy. However, after hearing of your night visions, Lady Selene has granted me permission to share this with you in hopes that knowing what waits

for you in the cave will help ease your mind. She and I are set to travel to Kestramere Hold in Elberien to meet with the other High Lords and Ladies as well as their army commanders to finalize the set up of the trials,” he explained, the glint of sadness in his eyes remaining as he continued on. “Each trial is to be designed to see how well you fare dealing with each element, but only after you have received your gift. Some of the commanders have voiced concerns of new recruits not being up to the task, their powers not being strong enough. These concerns lead to a meeting of the realms, and it was Rowan, High Lord of Drennadell, who suggested the trials be added.”

I looked up at my father, with all the strength I could muster and asked the question I already knew the answer to. “Are these trials designed to be dangerous?”

Father remained silent for quite some time before saying, “we should continue this conversation with Kyllan.” With that, he rose from his chair, leaving me behind and strode from the room.

Grumbling, I trailed after him, grabbing Mother’s tea tray on my way back to the kitchen. The sound of muffled voices became clearer as I approached. “I had to tell her Elora, what was I to do, lie to my own daughter? She already thinks we’ve been keeping secrets from her; I will no longer stand by while she tries to arm herself with doubt. How is she supposed to trust us if we don’t tell her the truth Elora, tell me, how?” Father’s hushed tone carried to my ears. I paused, not daring to make a sound.

“Roarke, we agreed not to tell her, you were sworn to secrecy by the High Court. By telling her, you have put your job as Commander of the Brokenstone at risk. Not just that, but you mean to stand here and tell me it is your intention to train her against what she will face in the trials? How is that going to go over when she outperforms all the others? The High Court will have your head then I will be left a widow. So tell me Roarke, have you considered me at all in any of this?” Mother scoffed.

“Of course I have Elora, Selene granted us permission for that very reason. If any of the other court members question it, she will come to my aid, my love. My head will remain firmly planted on my shoulders, I’m too stubborn to die.” He chuckled

“I know you love her, as do I. Just promise me you will do what is necessary to keep her from harm but not stand out amongst the others. Please, my love, do this for me,” she pleaded

“I promise,” he responded. “I will take her and Kyllan to Verena to train under the guise that we are staying there through the Summer Solstice in preparation for our departure for their Awakening. The Brokenstone won’t question it as they will miss their trip to the capital the week before their graduation. The units are used to seeing vilande come in and out of the camp anyway,” he explained further.

Mother sighed before scolding him, “you better hope this works. If this decision costs me both my daughter and my husband you better hope I don’t find you in the afterlife Roarke Montalli.”

“Elora, really. Who is going to question a military man’s daughter trying to get a jump start on her training? Everything is going to be fine,” and with that, my father kissed my mother on the forehead, reassuringly.

Silence descended upon the hall and I continued to the kitchen. It was no surprise that Kyllan was still here, seated where he’d been when I stormed from the room. He looked at me, eyes wet and swollen from the tears he’d shed when Mother left him alone.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed you would want to be tied to me. It’s just,” he paused. I waited for him to continue with an anxious mind, taking deep breaths to try and calm myself. I opened my eyes and turned to face him, ready for whatever admission he was going to make. “I feel silly saying it really, even though I think we’ve both known this is where our friendship would eventually lead.” He took a deep breath, took my hands in his and said, “Asena, my feelings for you go beyond friendship. I have this innate desire to protect you at all costs, even from forces that are foreign to me. I don’t say this so you’ll feel guilty and accept the vow with me. I say this so you can forgive me for my assumption this morning, you see, I thought you felt the same way. Now it’s clear to me that you don’t.”

I sighed and removed my hands from his. “I don’t know how I feel, Kyllan, but I do know it’s silly for us to get involved with anyone before the Awakening. As I said this morning, what happens if we don’t end up in the same realm? Yes, we could stay true to one another during our training and *maybe* visit one another, but you know we would not be allowed to live in the same realm if our gifts aren’t matched. It goes against the laws of our land. So, I say we wait to move beyond friendship until our fates are decided,” I said, trying to be understanding. “I’m sorry, Ky. I know that’s not the answer you wanted, but it’s the answer I can give right now.”

A hand rested on my shoulder. “I think you’re ready for these now,” Father said, tossing the leather pouch on the table in front of me. He took the seat to my right and turned his gaze to Kyllan. “Elora and I have known of your feelings for Asena for quite some time. You have always been like a son to us and should the fates allow and Asena agree, you have our blessing to court her. However, you should know that during your years of training you will both change. I’ve seen it more times than I can count as commander. You need to be prepared to drift apart, even if you should both end up back here in Herbexia. A fact that brings me to let you in on the news I shared with Asena in the library.”

I watched as Father told Kyllan about the trials that lie in wait for us in the cave. Kyllan nodded along as Father spoke, asking questions, trying to understand just as I had. Mother entered the room with a disapproving look, clearly her feelings hadn’t changed. She milled about the room, preparing lunch for the four of us. Having already heard this portion of Father’s story, I went to help her. We worked quietly in tandem, her slicing the leftover roast beef from last night’s dinner to put on bread, and me preparing a salad to have with the sandwiches. I glanced over my shoulder every now and then, watching Kyllan as Father continued to explain the trials in the cave, noting the worry lines furrowing deeper and deeper on Kyllan’s brow.

After tossing the salad, I retrieved four plates from the cupboard and placed them on the counter, adding two slices of fresh bread to each plate. I carried the salad bowl over to the table and returned to the counter to help Mother finish up the sandwiches. I methodically sliced the tomatoes while she brewed a pot of tea and finished setting the table. I added the tomatoes along with a bit of lettuce to the sandwiches and carried the plates to the table, reclaiming my seat across from Kyllan. Father wasted no time clearing his plate of food and fixing himself another sandwich while the rest of us finished our lunch in silence.

“Father, you never answered my question in the library. Are the trials going to be dangerous?” I inquired once again.

“They aren’t supposed to, but we won’t know the specifics of each trial, just the overall design of them. Your mother and I have decided that if you both wish, I will help train you defensively against them. We don’t have long before The Awakening, but we can make the most of our time if you two are up for it,” Father



explained, flashing a hesitant look at my mother who only nodded in agreement.

I removed my cuff from Father's leather pouch and placed it on my wrist, flashing a smile at Kyllan. "I'd like that very much, Father, and I'm sure Kyllan would as well." I handed Kyllan his cuff, then rose from my seat to start clearing the table.

Kyllan slid his cuff on and said, "I would sir, thank you. I do feel as though I should get home. I need to let my parents know I'll be spending more time here than usual to train. Am I able to tell them about the new trials?"

"We have spoken with your parents already, they know there will be an additional element to the Awakening this year, but not about the additional trials. As far as your cuff and the vow, we did check in with them years ago before we had the cuffs made for the two of you. However, I'm sure they'll be excited to hear that you two have come to the decision to fulfill it," Mother stated.

"And you'll need to let them know you won't be home again until graduation. We leave tomorrow for Verena, you two will be staying with me at the Brokenstone barracks and training there," Father added.

Kyllan rose from the table, said his goodbyes, and made his way to the door. "Wait!" I called, running after him, "let's tell your parents together."

# CHAPTER



# 5

*Asena*

We arrived at Kyllan’s cottage just as the sun fell behind the hills that overlooked our small town. The smell of cobbler and roast chicken wafted toward us as we crossed the threshold of his home, a scent delectable enough to make my mouth water. Corvina had always been an excellent cook, only using the freshest ingredients from her garden or a farmer just outside of town. We made our way through the house, following that delicious smell to the kitchen where we would no doubt find Corvina fussing about, making sure everything was perfect as usual.

“Mom, I’m home.” Kyllan called down the hall, “I’ve got Asena with me.” We continued down the hall as Corvina poked her head out of the kitchen.

“That’s lovely dear, Asena will you be staying for supper? I assure you there is more than enough,” she said, quickly ducking back into the kitchen to tend to the meal she was preparing.

“I don’t think I could ever deny myself your cooking, Corvina,” I replied with a smile before turning to Kyllan. “You should probably go wash up for dinner and find your father, I’ll help your mother here.” He gave me a quick nod and disappeared from the room. I made my way to the sink to wash my hands before diving in to help Corvina finish up dinner and set the table.

I was placing drinks on the table when Kyllan sauntered through the doorway of their cozy kitchen. I stole a glance at him over my shoulder as I returned to the counter to retrieve the roast chicken to place it in the center of the table. That was the difference between Mother and Corvina, Mother always made plates and would often interrupt her own meal to make seconds for Father if he'd allow. Corvina always brought the meal to the table for everyone to help themselves. I supposed it had to do with the difference in their age as Corvina was forty years younger than Mother, even though neither of them looked a day over twenty five, another perk of the immortality I was soon to gain I suppose.

I joined Kyllan at the table as Allerick entered the kitchen and placed a small peck on his wife's cheek before taking his own seat at the head of the table. Corvina took her place in the seat to his right as Kyllan had already seated himself to the left. Allerick picked up the carving fork and knife and began slicing the chicken. He placed the first slice on Corvina's plate, the next on my own, then Kyllan's before serving himself. I reached to scoop myself a heaping of roast carrots and potatoes, and as I did so, the light gleamed off of the emerald green cuff situated on my wrist, causing an ethereal gleam to emulate from it.

"Ah, I was wondering when we would see these," Allerick said knowingly, nodding towards the cuff on my wrist. "Let's see yours, Kyllan." I blushed as Kyllan pushed up his sleeve to reveal his own cuff. He held his arm out for his parents to see and I did the same.

"They really are quite lovely. I've been waiting for the day when you both would tell us you decided to fulfill your vow to one another. Your father and I couldn't be happier," Corvina beamed at Kyllan.

"I'm afraid there's a bit more to the story, Mother," Kyllan said, and I shot him a warning glance. "Our vow only goes so far as the end of The Awakening, but not beyond that. Asena and I decided it would be best not to make rash decisions until our futures were more clear."

Corvina placed both of her hands on ours and gave us a reassuring smile. "I'm sure the fates will give you both exactly what you need. I agree that it is best not to make any more decisions until after the ceremony."

Allerick clasped Kyllan on the shoulder and nodded before going back to his meal. "This meal is delicious my love", he stated, trying to change the topic. "Did you two get any target practice in today?"

I chuckled. “Well, that was our intention, but I got a bit sidetracked.” I turned to Corvina, “I did find a gorgeous clearing today not too far off of the gravel road between our cottages. You should see it!”

“Not too far off the road, are you serious Ase?!” Kyllan asked incredulously. “That clearing was a good twenty minute walk off of the road, you’re lucky it was me that found you and not a herd of Quinlyyn. With that bow across your back they would have seen you as a threat and you’d have been dead.”

I shuddered at the thought. The Quinlyyn roamed the woods of Herbexia and were typically peaceful creatures, so long as you left them alone. I’d only come across one twice before, it was a beautiful, terrifying creature with the body of a horse and spiked scales along its spine that lead up to a head that resembled that of a small dragon. It had a flowing mane of moss and flowers crowned with a grand set of antlers. Dark scales covered its chest creating a sheath of armor, making it nearly impossible to hunt without magik. When threatened, it charged with its head down to try and impale its prey on razor sharp antlers. If that didn’t work, it would whip its sharp scaled tail around to throw its prey a great distance. Thankfully both times I ran into one I wasn’t equipped with anything more than my satchel containing some spare change and a good book on my way to the market or Kyllan’s.

“Yes, well I guess I didn’t realize how far off the road it truly was, and yes Kyllan, I am thankful it was you and not a Quinlynn,” I said sheepishly, pushing around the vegetables on my plate before scooping another bite into my mouth. I savored the taste, the vegetables from their garden were delicious and always tasted fresh. “I have to agree with your husband Corvina, this meal truly is heavenly.”

She nodded in thanks as we finished our meal in silence. Kyllan rose to clear the table as Corvina served a fresh pot of tea. “Asena, your father sent word earlier that he’d like to get a jump start on training for you and Kyllan. We think that would be a wonderful idea. It’ll be easier for the two of you to get your stances underway before you are granted your gifts,” Allerick stated as he sipped his oolong tea, a staple in the Montalli household.

“That was Father’s thoughts exactly, Sir. I’m afraid I must be getting home. I’ve got to rest up for our trek to Verena tomorrow. Kyllan, I’ll send for you when it’s time. Corvina, thank you again for dinner,” I stated, hugging the Vernizes goodbye, leaving the kitchen,

and making my way to the front door. I had just slung my quiver and bow across my back when I heard footsteps too heavy to be Kyllans approach me.

“Asena, I know there’s more going on than I’m assuming you can tell. Promise you’ll keep my boy safe, and tell your Father we appreciate all he is doing for him. I know it will be nice for him to train you both.” Allerick said before wrapping me into a bear hug.

“Of course Sir, and you’re right. I can’t tell you everything, but I promise I will do everything in my power to keep Kyllan safe. You all are family to me, even if we aren’t blood. I appreciate all that you have done for my parents over the years as well. I’m afraid if you and Corvina hadn’t come along to cheer them up after they lost my brother, I wouldn’t be here.” I admitted. I gave him a final hug and bolted out of the door before coming clean about the elemental trials that lie in wait in the cave.

# CHAPTER



# 6

*Asena*

I awoke the next morning excited for what the day would bring. I leapt from my bed and hurried over to my bureau to quickly pull a set of spare training leathers I brought home from Greenbrier Academy. Deciding to forgo my braid today I threw my hair up in a quick bun, like the female soldiers in father's army wore, a style I'd need to get accustomed to once I joined after the awakening. I bounced down the hall with excitement toward the kitchen for my morning cup of tea.

The smell of peppermint reached me before I ever set foot in the kitchen. I rounded the corner to enter the kitchen and found a piping hot cup of tea stirring itself in front of my usual chair at the table, alongside it was a bit of enchanted parchment. Smiling to myself I sat down and began writing to Kyllan while enjoying my tea.

*Kyllan,*

*Best to head towards our cottage if you haven't left yet. I imagine Father will want to head out early this morning. See you soon.*

*Be Safe,*

*Asena*

I quickly folded the letter into the shape of a wolf and whispered "travel fast and far my sweet" causing the wolf to leap into the air and out of the window.

The door closed softly as I brought my teacup to my lips, mother must be back from her morning errands. The footsteps in the hallway grew closer, I looked up just in time to see a very pissed off Kyllan round the corner into our cozy kitchen. I bit back a laugh, noticing the shimmer of pixie dust that coated the right side of his face.

“Well I’m glad you think this is fucking hilarious, Asena,” Kyllan barked out.

“Don’t get your panties in such a twist Ky. I was trying to be considerate and make sure you were here on time, had you sent me a letter I’d have known you were on the way. Then *maybe* you wouldn’t be standing before me looking like you’ve been hunting pixies all morning!” I retorted.

“I was five steps from your front gate, could you not have looked out the window? I mean really come on, Ase,” Kyllan stated matter of factly.

“Fine, from now on I’ll lean out my window in search of you like some poor damsel in distress looking for her knight! Mother above, you are so unbelievably thick sometimes, the world, my world, doesn’t revolve around you, Ky. I’m sorry my wolf marked you this morning, I’m sorry I don’t feel differently about us....” my voice trailed off. “Maybe with time it will be different,” I added, my voice barely a whisper.

“Fuck, Asena I’m sorry.” Kyllan turned away from me, rubbing a hand across the back of his neck. “I promise it won’t always be like this between us, I just need time to come to terms with your feelings about us.”

He turned to face me again as the front door burst open, followed by footsteps thundering through the hallway.

“I hope you two are ready, I’ve got a full day planned for you both.” Father’s voice bellowed through the house, echoed by the sound of his footsteps growing closer.

He rounded the corner and entered the kitchen where Kyllan and I stood. His eyes drifted from my face to Kyllan and back again. “Whatever you two are arguing about, settle it before we leave for the training grounds. I will not have you bringing emotions into that camp, the Brokenstone will be watching you both as you are a direct reflection of myself. You will be shown no mercy, so pull yourselves together and meet me outside in five minutes.”

He turned to leave and paused, taking a final look at Kyllan. “I know it may seem like your entire world is crumbling right now boy, but there is so much of it you have yet to see. Give it time.” He clasped a hand on his shoulder for a brief moment before fleeing from our home.

“Can we just get through these next three weeks please?” I pleaded, tears threatening to fall from the corner of my eyes.

“I’m sorry Ase, I promise to try to be better about this,” Kyllan said with a sigh. “I’ll do my best to be a better friend to you, can you forgive me? Is *trying* enough?” He looked at me, really looked at me and I thought I caught a glimpse of his soul in that moment.

The reality of it all hit me. I could be rejecting my mate, unfortunately I wouldn’t know for sure until I weaved my way through the cave and received my own set of antlers along with Kyllan. I bit the corner of my lip and looked up at him. He was still looking at me, his eyes bloodshot and his expression completely apologetic.

“Of course it’s enough, Ky. I’m sorry too, I don’t mean to close that door completely. I just,” I paused. “I just really need to focus on getting through The Awakening.”

Kyllan walked over and wrapped his arms around me. The scent of lemongrass and cedar infiltrated my senses, something about the way he smelled was always soothing. I pulled away from him just as father threw the door open again.

“Come on you two, we’re going to be late if we don’t get a move on,” he called, slamming the door closed.

We made our way to the front of the house, slung our bows and quivers across our backs, and left the house. Stepping outside I was taken aback by the three large Elven Steeds that stood before me. The first was a beautiful dapple gray male, I recognized him immediately as Amarok, Father’s battle-worn steed. Amarok’s helmet matched Father’s own, golden in color with large horns that were made to mimic Father’s antlers. The next horse was just as beautiful, solid black with a white mane and tail, this steed had yet to be claimed by a rider as its helmet did not have horns. The last steed stood taller than the other two, solid white in color with a black snout. The only mare among the bunch, one look at Father’s wide grin told me she was meant for me.

“Is she truly mine?” I asked.



“She was meant to be your welcoming gift after The Awakening, my sweet girl. If the Mother has mercy and you are granted the gift of Earth she shall be yours,” Father claimed. “Kyllan, the black male is to be yours as he is the sibling to the white mare, he will always protect her.”

We climbed atop our steeds and strode toward Verena, where The Brokenstone training camp sat.

# CHAPTER



## 7

### *Asena*

We'd been traveling for hours when we came upon the town of Gaelia nestled at the base of the Moksha mountains just outside of Verena. Father steered Amarak toward the town, causing our steeds to follow suit. The town was lively with preparations for The Awakening festival. It was common tradition that those who were unable to travel to Alynthi to watch the newly gifted emerge from The Crystal Cave celebrated in their own towns, or even their capital if they were able.

As we traipsed through the city we could see tall elven folk molding the land to create tall columns around the town, allowing their fellow elvish brethren to conjure vines of ivy and wisteria to connect from column to column. The sight was truly magnificent, and for the first time in ages I finally felt a tinge of excitement at the thought of soon receiving my own gift.

Father continued to lead us down the cobblestone road, past the apothecary on the left and the clothing shop on the right, straight to the town stables next to The White Stag pub.

“We need to get you two fed and discuss a few things before we arrive at the grounds, come on.” Father stated as he dismounted Amarak, handing his lead to the stableboy.

Kyllan and I dismounted and handed our mounts' reins over before following father into The White Stag. Dipping his head so as not to hit his antlers on the frame, he entered the pub, making his way to a table in the far right corner. Music flowed

from the band in the corner over the sounds of conversations nearby as we passed tables before sitting down at our own. The barkeep made his way over and greeted us with a smile.

“Roarke, your usual mate?” The elf asked, clapping father on the shoulder as he glanced at the two of us. “Err, or maybe not. These two seem a bit young for whiskey.” he said, jabbing a thumb in our direction.

“I’m afraid we’re just here for a bite to eat, Bellamir, What’s the special today?” Father asked.

“Meat and cheese turnovers with roast potatoes and carrots, quite delicious. The missus is in the kitchen today, thank the Mother for that, I needed the reprieve,” Bellamir boasted with a chuckle.

“We’ll have three please, and a pitcher of water from the spring,” Father requested.

“Anything for our favorite commander,” Bellamir said, and retreated to the kitchens.

“Thank you for lunch Roarke, it’s been a while since I’ve had a meal made by someone other than Mum or Elora,” Kyllan exclaimed.

Kyllan and Father went on chatting amongst themselves while I took a moment to take in my surroundings. I’d never been to The White Stag before, even though it seemed this was one of Father’s usual haunts while he was out with The Brokenstone. A large oak tree sprouted through the center of the pub, its branches bursting through the roof as if yearning for the sunlight upon its leaves. Mismatched tables were strewn about in no particular pattern across the floor, avoiding the far left corner where the band was playing. A large low hanging branch had been manipulated to curve down-ward and flatten out creating the bar that sat at the far wall across from the entrance. Moss covered stools sat in front of it where a couple of patrons were sharing stories of their travels through the neighboring realm of Loritholen.

“Does that sound good to you, Asena?” Kyllan asked.

“I’m sorry what?” I asked sheepishly.

“We are going to be staying at the capital until graduation, Roarke said he sent word ahead and they’ve got a space set up for us at the barracks,” Kyllan explained.

“Um, yea I guess. I just didn’t pack anything,” I retorted with a sigh.

“There will be training leathers and army issued sleepwear available for you both at the camp, I sent your sizes to Bria and she’s got everything sorted for you two,” Father explained.

Bellamir appeared at our table with three large plates. “House specials all around,” he said, setting our plates in front of us.

We ate our meals in comfortable silence, listening to the joyful music that flowed through The White Stag. Father settled our tab with Bellamir and we ventured back to the stables to fetch our mounts.

“Remember, when we arrive at the grounds you two are a direct reflection of myself. I’m asking you to keep your heads down and do your best to go unnoticed by any of the others,” Father stated, steering Amarok out of Gaelia.

Kyllan and I exchanged a look of understanding before following father beyond the city walls towards Verena.

# CHAPTER



## 8

### *Asena*

Verena was beautiful on a normal day, but today as residents and shopkeepers began decorating for The Awakening festival, it was absolutely stunning. Sandstone buildings with moss covered roofs lined either side of the main thoroughfare, large tapered cedar columns protruded from the ground in the center of the main road all the way down to the fountain in the square. Each column featured intricate carvings inspired by our High Lady Selene, the Mother and the Elven gift of Earth. A malachite orb adorned the top of each tower. I remembered from my own teachings that malachite was the crystal that the original Earth shifter Brynne discovered coincided with her magik, helping her to focus and provide control over her power.

As we approached the square, the sandstone buildings grew more intricate in appearance. The shop owners had manipulated the bark from fallen trees to cover the lower portion of the facade of their buildings, and used what appeared to be fallen limbs to create a rounded appearance for the windows and doors. I waved to the familiar faces of the bookshop owner, cobbler, fletcher, and tanner as we passed by their shops. They all smiled and waved, pausing for a moment before going back to decorating. Each of them fussed over their decor for the festival, producing large blooms of dahlias, magnolias, and lilies while hanging lanterns of fae lights outside their door. I turned my attention forward as rows of climbing roses made their way across the street around us and up the wooden columns lining the center of the street.

“It really is something isn’t it?!” Kyllan exclaimed, taking in our surroundings.

“It’s breathtaking,” I replied wistfully, my voice full of wonder. “I’ve never been here this close to the ceremony.”

“Elora and I wanted to wait until it was time for your ceremony to bring you, the city truly is magikal this time of year,” Father explained. “Though, it is a bit early for the decorating to start.”

We trekked through the town, Kyllan and I excitedly pointing out all of the decor to each other, stopping to talk to shopkeepers and chatting amongst ourselves. Upon reaching the town square I noticed the malachite crown that now adorned the head of the Mother that stood tall in the fountain in the center of the square. Father just shook his head and chuckled to himself.

“The Realms are really going all out for this one, it seems kids. I suspect that to be reflected in the cave as well,” Father stated, nodding towards the statue.

“Thankfully we will be prepared, at least we should be with the additional training you are giving us!” I said nervously.

Father headed toward the stables at the far end of the square. He stopped just short of it and dismounted, handing Amarak’s reins over once again. We followed suit, dismounting as well. It seemed we would be continuing our journey on foot.

“It’s not too much farther to the grounds, just around that bend there. Now you two can’t be telling anyone where our barracks and grounds are, understand?” Father asked, turning to look at us.

“Yes sir,” Kyllan and I answered in unison.

The entrance to The Brokenstone barracks was not one that you would think to enter should you come across it naturally. Between two small shops, not too far off the town square, stood a large maple tree. Awestruck, I watched as father’s copper and malachite ring began to glow. He waved a hand over a patch of hanging moss on the north side of the trunk, the moss disappeared, revealing a hidden entrance beneath. Father extended his arm gesturing us to go ahead of him. Ducking my head I entered the tree first. Once over the threshold, I found myself on a downward spiral staircase. Sounds floated up the staircase as we made our descent. The sounds became more distinct, and I knew they must be the muffled voices of father’s soldiers. Down and down, around and around the staircase wove. Finally, I reached the bottom only to be met with a locked door at the end of a small hallway. Letting out a sigh, I leaned against the wall and waited for father and Kyllan to make their way down.

“Roarke, please tell me that we don’t have to go back up those stairs to leave,” Kyllan pleaded.

Father’s laugh boomed throughout the cavern as he plucked a key from the pouch on his belt. “Of course not boy, we aren’t in the nature of punishing our soldiers before sending them into battle. There’s an exit out

the back, but I didn't think you'd want to walk up that hill to get here," he explained with a shrug. In one swift movement he unlocked the barracks door, placed the key back in its pouch, and pushed the door open.

Once inside the barracks, we found ourselves completely underground. I quickly surveyed my surroundings and noted that The Brokenstone barracks had indeed been carved into the southern side of the Moksha Mountains. Extended before us was a long corridor with several doors on either side, at the end stood a set of large double doors. As we strode toward them, I noted which doors were open at the side and who, or what was behind them. I nodded to Kyllan when I found the one that seemed to be the common area for the soldiers. There were three small round tables inside with a few of the soldiers gathered around playing cards, writing letters, and restringing their bows. The farther we traveled down the corridor the cooler the air around us grew. At last we reached the end, but just as father lifted a hand to open the massive set of doors the last door on the left flew open.

"I'm so sorry I'm late sir, I should have been here to greet you," a very out of breath female said.

"That's quite alright, Bria. I assure you I know my way around the barracks, and these two know better than to wander off," Father said, motioning to myself and Kyllan.

"Ah yes, speaking of, I've made those housing arrangements you requested. Naturally, Heidi had a fit when I started moving soldiers around but when I explained it was for the captain she was magikally okay with it." Bria laughed.

"Oh how I would have loved to have seen that," Father said with a good natured chuckle and turned to us. "Asena, Kyllan, this is Bria. She is my second in command and will be overseeing your training once you have gone through the ceremony, until then you're stuck with me. Unless I'm called away by Lady Selene, in that case you will join Bria's unit."

I turned to get a good look at Bria, who was practically beaming with joy. I'm sure training the offspring and family friend of your commander was a great honor. She was tall and lean, with white silken hair that had been braided and wound into a tight bun at the base of her skull. Her antlers were very unique, as they wound backwards like that of a ram but were stark white in color, I'd never seen anything like them. With her hair like winter snow and her unusual antlers against her honey colored skin, Bria was striking.

"It's a pleasure ma'am," Kyllan said with an outstretched hand, always the polite and proper one.

"Sucking up gets you nowhere, Ky," I giggled. "Your antlers are gorgeous, Bria, and as Kyllan said, it really is nice to meet you. Father

talks about you so frequently I feel as if I know you already,” I beamed.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both as well,” she said before turning back to father. “I like this one Roarke, she’s got spunk, the unit could use that,” Bria barked with a short laugh. “If you’d like I can show these two where they will be bunking while they’re here and you can settle into your quarters. Then we can meet on the grounds in, let’s say, twenty minutes?”

“Thank you Bria, that sounds lovely. I’ll see you soon kids, listen to her,” Father said before setting off towards the door on the opposite side of the hall.

“Come along you two, your quarters are just through this door here,” Bria stated as she went back down the hall and through a small door on the right-hand side.

We followed quickly behind her, clambering through the door. We found ourselves in another hallway, this one seemed to be the living quarters for the army, or at least a part of it.

“This hall belongs to the newest recruits. You two will stay here until you complete your first year of training then you’ll move to the battalion unit hall,” Bria explained.

She stopped in front of the door, almost exactly in the center of the hall. “Ah yes here we are.” Bria opened the door, exposing the small living quarters inside. “This is your bunker for the time being, you each have your own bedroom but I’m afraid there’s only one bathroom. You do have a small kitchen with a fridge but most of us eat together in the mess hall, I’ll show you that later.”

I stepped inside and took stock of the small space. In the main room there was a small sofa against one wall with a short table in front of it. A television sat atop a squatty bookshelf opposite the sofa. I could picture myself living here, for a time at least. I sauntered into the bedroom off the left side of the main living space. It held a queen size bed, one nightstand and a small bureau. I sat my bag down on the bed, claiming this room for myself.

“I’ll let you two freshen up and meet you in the hall in five minutes. We’ll need to return to the commander soon,” Bria called as she exited our bunker and closed the door behind her.



# CHAPTER



## 9

*Asena*

After settling in, Bria led us back to the set of large double doors at the end of the long corridor. We stopped just outside the doors to wait for father, and Bria, regardless of our pleading, wouldn't go in without him. Just when I thought we might be wearing her down enough to let us through, the sound of father's voice came booming into the hall.

"I don't care who complained, it is a temporary housing change," Father bellowed. "Besides, those two will be in the battalion unit hall after the awakening anyhow, bellyaching about it now sure as shit won't get them out of it."

"Yes sir, and I explained that. They just...didn't see the reason they had to give up their quarters when there are so many others that could have moved as well," a meek feminine voice remarked, sheepishly.

The door containing the source of the voices flung open. Father and a rather timid looking female stepped through the threshold into the corridor. The female may have seemed delicate, but was built anything but. Muscles rippled across her back and down her arms, she stood almost as tall as father, with tall proud antlers perched atop her head. Her soft brown hair, woven into a braid that hung over her shoulder, complemented her olive complexion. Where Bria

reminded me of the beauty of winter with her stark hair and brilliant antlers, this female reminded me of summer, warm and kissed by the sun.

“Heidi, I’m going to be honest, because frankly I don’t know what else to tell you. Those two were moved because they are the worst performing recruits I’ve seen in the last thirty years. Bria and I hoped moving them up early would give them a confidence boost. However, I can see now that they deserve no such consideration and will most likely be completing their entry level training over again. They will not be advancing until they can call their power in their sleep. Do you understand me?” Father answered, Heidi shook her head yes. “Wonderful, now bring their sorry asses to the training arena, I’d like to have a word with them.”

Heidi spun on her heels and was gone in an instant, disappearing through a different door than she came. Father pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath before joining us.

“Are you really going to make them go through training again, Sir?” Bria asked.

“Honestly, if they keep bitching, I’m tempted to. Who the fuck do they think they are to question a direct order from command? It’s maddening!” Father said curtly before turning to Kyllan and I. “I’m sorry you two are being dragged into this mess. Let’s get on with your training before it’s time for supper.”

He and Bria each pulled an emerald key out of the pouch on their belt and inserted one into either door. Their keys turned in the lock with a loud click that echoed throughout the corridor. The noise was soon drowned out by the sound of water crashing into itself growing louder as the doors were heaved open. I stared ahead at the backside of a waterfall, the coolness from it licking my cheeks as I got closer. Father and Bria ventured down the moss ridden path and through the waterfall, I turned to look at Kyllan and with a shrug we followed suit.

Shock rang through me as I emerged from the water and found that not one of us had gotten wet. Noting the bewildered expression both Kyllan and myself wore, Bria chuckled

“I take it you didn’t tell them about the enchantments here then?” She mused.

“And ruin the fun of seeing these two in awe of the place? Absolutely not.” Father laughed as he turned to us to explain, “as you now know, there are quite a few enchantments placed upon the

grounds and the barracks itself. These are not only for our protection but to help test the new recruits. Several of them were put into place by the original nine, each of them protecting all nine of the training grounds. Some of the High lords and ladies that came after them chose to change things or get rid of them completely, leaving only the power of their realm to protect their armies. Lady Selene always sought to keep with our land's traditions and kept the enchantments as they were and are now."

"So the waterfall, had our intentions been undesirable, would have soaked us then?" Kyllan asked as he cocked his head ever so slightly.

"More than that boy," Bria exclaimed incredulously. "The waterfall is designed to pummel any being that wishes to do harm to any Herbexian. It will drown you before you can so much as lift a hand to save your own life."

Kyllan's eyebrows shot up. "Don't scare the poor lad, Bria," Father scolded. "You two are plenty safe here, the enchantments are in place for your protection. Now, follow me to the sparring ring, it's just across the way here."

Father led us down the path and across the stone bridge to the landing on the other side. Once there, we went down a narrow set of stairs and through a stone archway. I let out an audible gasp as I glanced around, turning around slowly as I walked down the moss lined path behind father. Sunlight glinted off of the malachite formations around the cavern. Large stone towers stood throughout the cavern on the west side with wooden targets attached, green feathered arrows protruding from each of them. A series of ropes, bridges, and ledges with archers perched upon them honing their aim lie in front of the columns. To the east side a vast amount of stone carpeted the ground, several soldiers stood atop it raising and lowering spiked towers of various sizes over and over again.

After passing both training areas, we reached a large plot of soft grass and father stopped. Turning to us he said, "this is where you will begin your training. The ground here has been enchanted to be soft should you take a hard blow and go down. Taking a hard fall on an already injured limb would only cause more damage, hence the need for the enchantment. I'll leave you two with Bria as it seems I have two rather large pain in the ass soldiers to deal with." He kissed me on the forehead and took off the way we came.

I turned to watch him go and saw Heidi approaching with two petrified looking males. "You two better have a fan-fucking-tastic

reason for mouthing off to Sargent Thornwood about your new bunkers,” Father boomed, pointing two fingers at the males.

Neither of them spoke, they just continued to stare at the ground before them.

Father grabbed each of them by the chin forcing them to look up. “If you don’t have the decency to come up with a bullshit reason for your abhorrent behavior, at least have the courage to look your Commander in the eye and receive your punishment like soldiers.” His voice just a notch above a whisper, I’d never seen this side of him before, it made my blood run cold with fear. At this moment in time, father was both the most impressive and most terrifying male I’d ever seen. He continued, ice ringing through his voice, “Start running, and don’t stop until you feel your legs give out. Now get the fuck out of my sight.”

*Is this how it would be when I messed up? Would it be worse because I was his daughter? What if I don’t end up in this realm, what if I end up somewhere with a more hateful commander? I thought to myself.*

“Asena!” Bria yelled.

“I’m sorry, I promise I’ll pay attention,” I said meekly.

“You must always be focused when in the arena. One wrong move could injure you greatly, that is the first step to understanding what it takes to be a great soldier,” Bria explained. “Now ready yourselves, we will start with defensive poses. Once you have those down I will throw some moss balls for you to dodge.”

“Yes ma’am,” Kyllan and I said in unison.

Over and over we got into our defensive pose. Knees bent, weight centered, hands up. Hold for fifteen minutes then relax and repeat. We must have gotten into the defensive position one hundred times before Bria showed us how to block our first moss ball.

“Using your forearm, knock it down and away from your face. Like so.” Bria demonstrated, bringing her forearm up just in time to knock the ball of moss down. “Now you two try, we’ll start slowly and speed up as you get the hang of it.”

Kyllan went first, missing the first few blocks, with one moss ball striking him on the side of his face, which still held a slight glint of pixie dust from this morning. Another struck him in the chest and the last on the shoulder. On his fourth go he successfully blocked the ball.

“Good, again!” Bria barked, launching three more moss balls at him and he deflected each of them. “Let’s speed things up a little shall we?”

One by one the moss flew faster at him, once he deflected three, another four came at a greater speed. They continued this pattern until Kyllan successfully deflected ten moss balls at high speed. Sweating and out of breath, he rested in his defensive position until Bria dismissed him and motioned for me to take his place.

“Ready?” Bria asked.

I settled into my defensive stance and shook my head. Once again she began to launch the moss across the small field. Only missing the first block, I managed to deflect the next five balls. As she did with Kyllan, she began increasing the speed, restarting each time I missed a block. By the time I successfully deflected ten balls in a row I was out of breath and starving.

“That’s enough for today. Go wash up and meet me outside of your bunker in forty minutes for supper,” She stated before stalking off to the two cadets father had punished earlier.

# CHAPTER



# 10

*Asena*

Arriving back at the bunker we found that linens had been dropped off, most likely by Heidi. I never thought I'd be so thankful for a fresh towel. I quickly gathered my things from my bag and made for the shower. Kyllan glared at me as I darted in front of him and stuck my tongue out before locking the door to the bathroom. I turned the knob and stepped into the warm water, relishing in the heat as it soothed my sore muscles. I groaned with pleasure, if everyday was going to be like this one it would be a long three weeks. One could only hope my body got used to the abuse I was about to put it through, otherwise may the Mother have mercy on my soul.

A fist pounding on the door pulled me from my euphoric stupor. Unable to make out the words I'm sure Kyllan was yelling through the door over the sound of the water bouncing off my skin, I quickly washed myself and exited the shower. Once dry, I wrapped the towel around my nimble form, double checking it wouldn't fall and exited the bathroom.

"About damn time. Is there even any hot water left?" Kyllan grumbled.

"We're in an underground barrack that you have to enter through a tree that's protected by enchantments and you are seriously worried about there not being enough hot water?"

Silence. Complete and utter silence. He just stood there looking at me, like he'd forgotten where we were.

“You go shower, I’m sure Bria will be here to collect us for supper soon,” I quipped, sauntering off towards my room and closing the door behind me.

I collapsed on the bed, by the Crystal, it was softer than the one I had back home, making me wonder if it was enchanted as well since we were not yet in our immortal form. Once the Crystal transformed us into elves the training would be much less strenuous on our bodies, so the extra comforts that were enchanted into beds, chairs, and the flooring in the training arena wouldn’t be needed. Or at least, that’s what we had always been told. It was a luxury that had been afforded to me all my life. I felt bad for those who never got to experience such comforts, those circumstances were left mostly to the children of soldiers who died in battle over the years and now lived in orphanages.

The sound of the shower cutting off alerted me to the fact that I needed to get up and stop lazing about before I fell asleep and missed dinner completely. With a groan I clambered out of bed and pilfered through my bag for anything that wasn’t a set of training leathers, this would be my first time meeting the army that I was to become a part of, I would be damned if I was going to look like some hum-ho run of the mill recruit. My father is their Commander after all. Smiling, I pulled out my favorite white top with the ruffled trim at the bottom, my green training corset and brown satin pants. It was the only thing I’d thought to bring with me and the exact outfit I planned to wear for the Awakening ceremony, right up until father told us about the added element of trials this year. Now I planned on wearing training leathers, new ones most likely as none of my old ones fit me properly since I went through my growth spurt over the summer.

Once dressed I emerged from my room, grabbing my boots in the process, to find Kyllan seated on the couch in the living room, the light glinting off his honey blonde hair still slightly damp from his shower. I plopped down next to him and began lacing my boots up the front when a knock sounded at the door. Kyllan strode to the door and opened it to find Bria standing in the hall, donning a simple sage green top and pants. Her white hair fell in waves around her shoulders, doing its best to cover any trace of ink upon her skin placed there by the Crystal.

“Are we ready?” She questioned, as she poked her head in our bunker.

“Just about, Ase is lacing her boots up now,” Kyllan answered.

I finished tying the strings on my right boot and hopped onto my feet. “All ready.”

“Let’s get a move on then,” Bria stated and made her way back to the main corridor, motioning for us to follow her.

I wound my hair in a quick loose braid as we walked, securing it at the end with the hair tie that I kept around my wrist. Once we were back to the main corridor we made a left towards the staircase which we had descended to enter the barracks earlier that day. The roars of conversation grew louder as we approached the mess hall. Bria made a left into the open set of small double doors revealing rows of long dining tables with groups of soldiers gathered around them, enjoying what appeared to be beef stew with a bit of bread on the side. As we walked past I caught bits and pieces of conversations being shared among comrades.

“I heard the commander made those two twits run until their legs gave out.”

“Serves them right, they’ve been pretty much useless since they arrived, can’t even erect a small column correctly.”

“Hell, just last week Woodard almost crushed Beckett trying to erect that small tower and ended up bringing part of the ceiling down on his unit.”

*Woodard and Beckett, they must be the two cadets father was yelling at earlier.* After hearing that, I didn’t feel quite as bad for them anymore, and a part of me wondered if father would keep true to his word and make them go back through their basic training again. *Mother above, I hope not, I don’t want to be in their unit.*

“Think they’ll do anything special for this year’s ceremony? I mean it is the three hundredth anniversary.”

“I’d bet there’s something in the works.”

“Yea and we’ll end up with the same soft-ass recruits like fucking Beckett and Woodard. Mother above, they’re an embarrassment.”

I stifled a laugh as we continued toward the front of the cafeteria to grab our bowls. The fragrant smell of oregano, garlic and basil infiltrated my senses and caused my mouth to water as we grew ever closer. Licking my lips, I approached the table where the cooks were stationed, doling out ladleful after ladleful of hearty beef stew, complete with roast carrots and savory potatoes. A loud gurgling noise from low in my stomach caused the cook closest to us to look up from the stew he was ladling into bowls. Snatching my bowl, he



poured an extra ladleful in before handing it back. He gave a curt nod to the cook next to him, and gestured toward me. The second cook gave Kyllan and Bria two slices of bread each and me three. I said my thanks to both of them as Bria led us to the table where father and several of his captains were seated. She claimed the seat on father's right, leaving the two directly across from the two of them open for myself and Kyllan.

"Ah, I'm sure they'll be fine. Poor shits could barely walk back to their bunker so I had Heidi take their dinner to them. I'll let them rest tomorrow, don't need to break them just yet."

The captains broke out in laughter as I brought my spoon up to my mouth savoring that first delectable bite. An audible *mmmm* escaped me as the flavors of the stew filled my mouth. I wasn't sure if it was hunger or if the food really was that good, but I'd wager it was a combination of the two.

"And who do we have here?" The large burly man to father's left asked.

"Well, Nedras, this would be my daughter, Asena, and family friend, Kyllan. These two will be joining us after the ceremony this year," Father explained. "They're here getting a bit of a jump start on their training before the ceremony."

"Is that right? Well, I'll have to stop by soon to see you two in action, seeing as I will be the captain of your unit once your first year of training is completed. Until then, you'll be under the watch of Bria, who you've already met," Nedras said before slurping a large spoonful of stew into his mouth.

"If their offensive maneuvers are anything like their defense, I think you'll be impressed. Speaking of, I'll meet you two on the field tomorrow morning at first light, the doors should be open as the entire first cadet unit will be there training. We'll pick back up where we left off today," Bria said, dipping a corner of sourdough bread into her stew before taking a bite.

"I thought Father would be training us?" I replied, a twinge of confusion to my tone as I glanced around the table.

Father shook his head, "I'm afraid I need to do a bit of work at Antheia Palace before the Summer Solstice. It seems I will no longer be traveling to Elberien. Bria will be overseeing your training and you'll get to meet a few of your future bunkmates this way as well."

I smiled at him and Kyllan said, “that sounds lovely. Thank you sir.”

“I heard from your headmaster at Greenbriar Academy today. You’ve both been excused from your classes for the next three weeks,” Father informed us, Kyllan and I high-fived one another in celebration. “Don’t get too excited, they will still be sending a messenger with all of your schoolwork. You’re expected to turn it in before graduation, if not you won’t be able to participate in your graduation ceremony. So please make sure you get that done, I frankly don’t want to be on the receiving end of either of your mothers for working you too hard to complete your schoolwork.”

“I’ll be sure to give them a half day in the middle of the week and won’t work them on the weekends so they have plenty of time to get that completed sir,” Bria said timidly.

“Much appreciated,” he retorted before taking a big drink from his glass.

As we finished our dinner, conversations flowed freely around us, talk of the ceremony and first cadets eager to be promoted surrounded us. That foreign feeling of excitement crept back into my veins. *Maybe the night visions won’t find me here*, I thought to myself, a flutter of hope in my stomach. A look at Kyllan told me he had the same thought. *Let’s hope we were both right*, I thought to myself. I would need a good night’s rest to get through our first full day of training with Bria and the other first cadets tomorrow. Standing from the table I stretched my arms above my head, relishing the relief that ran down my arms from my shoulder blades.

“We are going to knock off for the night, best to get plenty of rest for training tomorrow,” Kyllan said as he too stood from the table.

“You two have a good night, I believe Heidi brought trunks to your bunker with some belongings from home in them. If you need anything else just let myself or Bria know, we will have someone fetch it for you,” Father said, bidding us goodnight.

Worn out from the day’s events and sated from the hearty meal, we ventured back to our bunker in comfortable silence, only the sound of the fading roar of the cafeteria to keep us company.

# CHAPTER



# 11

## *Asena*

With a soft click, I locked the door to our bunker for the evening, before going to my room and changing into my sweatpants and loose t-shirt for the night. I stopped when I made it to the doorframe of my room, there at the foot of my bed was a sage green and brown leather trunk with brass metal fixtures on each corner. This must be the one father mentioned at supper, I made my way over and popped it open. The books from my room at home were the first thing that caught my eye and I let out a squeal of excitement.

The sound of thundering footsteps grew closer and Kyllan was at my side a moment later. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine you worry-wort.” I swatted playfully in his directions

“Well pardon me for worrying about my *friend*.” He threw his hands up in disbelief, shaking his head.

“Look, I was just excited to see my books from home.” I gestured to the books that lay on the base of my bed above the open trunk.

“Ah, so it was an excited scream then.” Chuckling, Kyllan turned on his heel and retreated back to his room.

“You’re a pain in the ass, you know that?” I said, tossing a sock at him as he left.

I turned my attention back to my trunk, eager to see what else lay inside. A few things I expected: more sweats and tees to sleep in, additional training leathers, and a stack of enchanted parchment and

pens to write home were located inside. Tucked away at the very bottom was a malachite pendant carved in the shape of a wolf, a smile pulled at the corners of my lips. I fastened the leather necklace behind my neck and let the pendant fall to my chest, running a hand over it and sending a silent prayer to the Mother to get me through these next few weeks unscathed.

After placing my additional clothing back in my trunk I picked up the small stack of books from my bed, trying to decide which one to dive into first. Finally I dwindled it down to two choices, this was a tough one as they were both at the top of my to be read list. So I did what any sane person would do and laid them both on the bed and with closed eyes I waved my hand back and forth over the two titles stopping suddenly overtop of one of them. Opening my eyes I found my hand positioned over *Love & War* by Savannah Giles. With a sigh I placed *To Kill A God* back into the trunk on the top of the pile, promising myself to read it next, knowing damn well that wouldn't happen and I'd be reading *All Is Fair*, the second installment of the book I'd selected. Pulling back the cover, I settled in for the night and dove into the world of Fyoria.



I awoke the next morning to find my book had been placed neatly on the table beside my bed and the light was switched off. Kyllan must've come to say goodnight only to find me passed out with the book on my face, *lovely*. Mother above my muscles felt like they were on fire. Groaning, I sat up and stretched before making my way to the bathroom to brush my teeth and get ready for the day.

"You missed breakfast but I grabbed you a muffin and coffee in a thermos," Kyllan said, holding up a coffee and a paper bag.

"Thanks, you could have woken me up though," I responded, rubbing the remains of sleep out of my eyes.

"I thought I'd let you sleep, seeing as you didn't wake me up screaming from one of your night visions last night."

I let out a nervous laugh before heading back to my room to change into my training leathers for the day. As I pulled on the stiff garments I thought to myself, *are they really gone? I haven't had a night vision for two days now, where before they were almost nightly*. Only time would truly tell, all I could do in the meantime was to try

not to let myself become full with hope. I sat on the edge of the bed and slid my boots on, wasting no time getting them laced this morning.

“Ready?” Kyllan questioned, his tall lean form leaning against the pine doorframe of my bedroom.

“Always.” A smirk plastered on my face, giving him a once over. I tried to keep my irritation to a minimum at the fact that his body showed no signs of soreness or weakness after yesterday’s training session.

I grimaced as I got to my feet, quickly hiding my face hoping he didn’t see. Showing weakness is something I never liked to do, especially to those who care for me, no need for them to worry unnecessarily. I moved past him, heading towards the door to leave for training. His hand clasped my wrist in protest pulling me backwards.

“What the fuck, Ky? We’re gonna be late!” I protested

With a shrug he sat on the floor, patting the bit of carpet next to him, gesturing for me to sit beside him. I looked at him incredulously, cocked my eyebrow, and went to walk past him when once again his hand grasped me in protest. I expelled a breath before opening my mouth to speak, only to be cut off.

“Ase, sit your ass down and stretch or you won’t be able to move tomorrow. Yesterday is already wearing on you I can tell, regardless of the fact that you’re trying to hide that you’re every ounce of muscle is screaming at you beneath the surface of your skin.” He said, his voice thick with a commanding tone.

My eyebrows shot up in surprise, this was a side of Kyllan I hadn’t seen before. I thought I’d seen him protective back home and at Greenbriar, but here around people that were foreign to us I guess that sense of protectiveness went into overdrive. Even if he was just protecting me from myself. With a sigh of defeat I sat down across from him with a wince.

“If we’re late I’m blaming you.” With my right arm stretched across my chest, I brought my left one up to pull it tight—creating tension—and held it for thirty seconds. Then I repeated the same motion for the other arm, a calm washing over me at the slight relief it provided.

“Fine by me.” Kyllan sat up on his knees and motioned for me to move my feet together. “But I can tell you the arena doors were still

closed before I came to see if you were ready.”

“Then why the hell did you come get me so early?” I protested, lying on my back as he stood on his knees bringing my left leg straight up and back towards my chest, bending my knee slightly as he settled my calf on his right shoulder. His face was mere inches from mine, the caramel flecks in his hazel eyes glinting in the light from the small entryway, causing goosebumps to run down my arms.

“Because I knew you’d need this.” I rolled my eyes as he sat my left leg down and repeated the same process with the right. “Protesting will get you nowhere, Ase. Your body needs the relief, it’s not used to the abuse you’re about to put it through.”

He slowly lowered my leg back to the ground and reached for my hands, pulling me into an upright sitting position. Placing the bottom of his feet against mine he spread our legs so they formed a wonky square. “Give me your hands again”

Obedying, I spread my legs further until I could reach his outstretched hands. He grasped my hands firmly in his and slowly began to pull his arms back to his sides, causing my torso to stretch in the most blissful way. Pleasure rippled through me at the relief the position provided, by the Crystal it felt good. I groaned when I felt him release my hands and the euphoric pulling sensation die along with their release.

“For all that huffing and puffing you seemed to enjoy yourself,” he said with a smirk and one eyebrow slightly cocked.

I stuck out my tongue, rose to my feet, and flew out the door, leaving him to chase after me. Once in the main corridor I heard his thunderous footsteps running down the hall, I was almost to the large set of doors that lead to the training arena when I felt his arms grasp me from behind. Picking me up as he whirled me around to face him, his arms rested just below the slight curve of my ass. I braced my hands against his chest as he continued to spin us, his thin lips curved upward in a full smile that reached his eyes.

“Put me down, you’re gonna make me sick!” I swatted at his chest playfully, thinking of the coffee and muffin churning in my stomach with each rotation.

“As you wish,” he said.

Slowing to a stop, he placed me gently back on the ground, his hands resting firmly on my lower back. After a few moments I

cleared my throat, dropping my gaze from his enticing stare and began to back away out of his possessive grasp.

“We should probably get going, I’m sure Bria is waiting for us.” I finally said, awkwardness hanging in the air between us.

Kyllan mumbled something under his breath too low for me to hear and shook his head as he barreled past me into the training arena.

*Get ahold of yourself, Asena, if you give into your desires you will both end up hurt.* I knew pushing him away would still end in heartache for Kyllan but it was the smart decision, the Mother only knew where we would end up after the Awakening and I didn’t want to make that potential goodbye any harder than it needed to be.

The sound of echoing voices accompanied by several sets of heavy footsteps brought me back to the moment. With a cleansing breath I shook off my exchange with Ky and set off for the waterfall that I was sure would haunt my dreams. The sound of crashing water sent a chill down my spine. I closed my eyes and ran through quickly, emerging on the other side completely dry just as the day before. *I’ll never get used to this.* I thought as I spotted the back of Kyllan’s bright yellow hair, the light bouncing off of it causing the natural highlights in it to appear white.

“You two ready for your first full day of training?” Bria asked, appearing out of nowhere. *Where did she come from anyway?*

“As ready as we can be, we did a bit of light stretching to limber up for the day,” I replied as I stepped onto the soft grass at the back of the training arena.

Bria made her way to the middle of the patch and looked around at the small group that gathered with us. I began to weave my way through the group to where Kyllan was standing. Several sets of antlers turned in our direction as her gaze fell to him and she gave a nod of encouragement before beginning today’s lesson.

“Today we will be going back to the basics,” she began as I stepped into place next to Kyllan. “After our review last week, Commander Montalli and I decided a few of you needed a refresher.” Groans of protest echoed around us. Bria held up a hand. “You will all do well to remember your unit is only as strong as your weakest member. You are not in competition with one another, you should be encouraging one another and pushing your fellow soldiers to their limits causing them to strive harder than they thought possible.”

She strode back and forth across the patch while she spoke, the passion behind her words intoxicating. Her silver stag pin glinting in the light, the pin that marked her as the second in command of the Brokenstone. Father bore a brilliant emerald green one and Heidi the bronze, Herbexia was traditional in even the smallest of ways. Back at the academy we learned that Vekroth's commanders bore dragon pins ranging from black to red, Loritholien's bore a set of wings ranging from dark gray to white, and Rastia a lightning bolt ranging from black to purple. Each realm's pin was a symbol of what the crystal transformed them into and the color it entwined their bodies with during the transformation.

Pausing in front of us she began again, "Balance. Without it your powers and skill set are useless. The muscles beneath your armor, a waste. Without proper balance you will lose your battle against even your weakest opponent. Balance you will find goes hand in hand with regulating your breathing. For the first portion of the day we will practice moving from offensive to defensive positions." She clasped her hands together, "Now you will notice that we have two vilande in our midst, they are here to train in preparation for the awakening in a few short weeks. It would do you all well to get to know them and make these two feel at home as we are *certain* they will be joining our ranks very soon."

I glanced around at the false smiles that didn't quite reach the eyes of the unit we were partnered with, returning what I hoped was a confident smirk. My eyes fell to one girl across the patch, meek in size but one who I was sure to be more fierce than any of the other soldiers here. Her raven colored hair was braided and fixed into a bun at the base of her neck, her brilliant sapphire eyes bore a piercing stare into Kyllan. Her antlers were ashen in color and curved upwards like a dragon's horns.

Bria had the unit fall into formation and positioned Kyllan and I to the left side near the front. This way we were easily accessible if we needed additional help with the stances. Slowly we moved from stance to stance to stance, moving our body weight forward and back, up and down while keeping our core centered. The unit was doing well, despite having the troublemakers among us, or so I thought. Just as we went into our second stance of the last rotation the entire back row of the unit fell, a slew of curses flying as they went down.

Bria began marching toward the middle of the unit and a small opening was cleared, giving her a direct path to the culprits behind



the downed line. *Woodard and Beckett, surprise surprise.* Bria grasped the back of their collars and yanked them to the front of the line, positioning them to the right so they stood across from us on their own.

“You two sit here and watch the rest of your unit do it correctly. Then you will perform each position for them until you can no longer stand.” Bria turned to the rest of us and barked, “Begin!”

Immediately we went through the rotation of movements, defensive to resting to defensive to offensive to resting and back to defensive. Going through the rotation twice before she motioned for us to stop.

“Well done cadets,” she praised before turning to Beckett and Woodard. “Now, let’s see if you two can get it right on the first try hmm.”

They began, clumsy on their feet like baby deer learning to stand, and made it through the first round of positions. The second went better and finally on their third round they became more fluid between their movements.

“Good, again. Get it right three times in a row and you may break with the rest of the unit for lunch,” Bria ordered.

*Finally, I was starved!* I reached for the malachite wolf resting against the skin of my neck and rubbed it for luck as I said a silent prayer to the Mother that these two buffoons would quit with their shenanigans and make it through these basic movements. I let out a sigh of relief when they made it into the final position swiftly and smoothly.

“Very good. That’s lunch, Cadets. I will see you all back here in one hour for the remainder of today’s lesson.” Once again the sea of cadets split making a path for Bria as she made her way past us and to the exit.

I was right behind her until I heard a sing-song voice coming from the other side of Kyllan. I turned my head and was surprised to see the raven haired girl from before standing there, those brilliant blue eyes gazing at him intently.

“Sephira, this is my *friend* Asena,” Kyllan said motioning to me with a smug grin.

“It’s nice to meet you Sephira, I’m sure we will get to know each other fairly well in the future!” I outstretched my hand to greet her with a handshake.

She turned towards me and accepted my greeting, her stare growing cold as her hand clasped around mine. “I look forward to it.”

Something in her eyes unsettled me and set me on edge, causing my teeth to grit involuntarily. *What the fuck was that about?* I thought to myself. I had to be imagining things, but nevertheless decided it best to keep an eye on her.

“Sephira, you should join Kyllan and I for lunch,” I offered, in a voice that was a little too sugary, smiling as I took a step closer to Kyllan, draping an arm over his shoulder.

Her cold stare bore into me as she gave me a once over, “That would be lovely, thank you.”

Once again, I felt my teeth gnash together in that involuntary clenching. She hooked her arm through Kyllan’s and they took off towards the exit leaving me to shuffle after them like an afterthought. Suddenly, a surge of jealousy ran through me, *who was this female and how did she so easily bewitch Kyllan? My Kyllan.*

# CHAPTER



## 12

### *Asena*

Over the next week the training became more and more grueling, causing me to collapse in bed each night from sheer exhaustion. I never thought I'd be so thankful for a day of rest to catch up on schoolwork in order to graduate with the rest of our class. I'd just sat at the small table in one of the common areas when a giggling Kyllan and Sephira burst in. I rolled my eyes and returned my focus to the mountain of books in front of me.

"Ky Ky, why can't you come to practice and do your school work later?" Sephira asked, nearly purring in a saccharine voice that reminded me of harpy nails on a chalkboard.

"Seph I've already told you, I'm so far behind on this shit I won't be here in a few weeks if I don't get it done. School was never my strong suit, thank the Mother for Ase, she kept my ass in line long enough to get me through the academy." He retorted.

She threw a quick look at me before returning her attention back to Kyllan, eyes narrowing in my direction so that her blue eyes became vivid slits of something only another female could completely understand. Mother above these two were annoying, and her constant chasing after him was grating on my every nerve. That twinge of jealousy that reared its head earlier in the week was still there, regardless of how much I tried to ignore it, making her presence here all the more bothersome.

“Fine. I’ll leave then. Just don’t expect me to wait around for an answer forever,” She said, flipping her raven colored hair over a narrow shoulder.

“Bye Sephira,” He said, gesturing for her to leave.

Sephira scowled and turned on her heel to leave, shooting me a warning glance that Kyllan seemed oblivious to, and left the room headed back to the training area.

“What’s her problem?” I asked, nodding toward the door Sephira just walked through.

“She wants me to go to some big dinner at Antheia Palace for the Solstice.” He sighed.

I looked up from my parchment, “Why would she go to that? She’s not a part of one of Herbexia’s high families.” I was certain that my words sounded venomous, and instantly regretted not keeping better control on my tone.

“Apparently there’s some meeting that Lady Selene is hosting next week, I’m surprised your father didn’t tell you about it. All the High Lords and Ladies as well as their commanders are coming. I’m assuming to finalize plans for the cave, but they’re masking it to the masses as a Solstice Dinner.” He whispered, careful to make sure no potential passersby could overhear.

“Father didn’t tell me, but he’s been gone for a few days, I’d bet he’s gone to get Mother,” I admitted sheepishly.

Why hadn’t he told me? You’d think he’d want me to attend so I could get a glimpse at what would await me if fate wasn’t on my side and the crystal places me somewhere other than Herbexia. But if Sephira was invited, that would mean she’s from one of the High families, or at least that of one of the commanders. I needed to go to that dinner, I’d have to hunt down father to ensure I got an invite.

“How far are you into the workload?” Kyllan asked, trying to make conversation.

“Honestly I just started, I grabbed coffee and a bagel from the mess hall just a bit ago then came here to get to work. Figured I’d take advantage of the quiet while everyone else is in training for the day.” I said, taking a sip from my thermos.

“Seems like a good plan.” He paused, “.....Sooooo do you want to do the lessons together or you take half and me take half then swap?”

I laughed, “We both know it’ll go faster and we will get higher marks if we do them together. Here, start with the history portion, that’s what I’m on right now. This is the easiest of them, then we will move to herbology, then astrology, and finish with apothecary class before lunch. That will just leave mythical beasts which has the longest list of lessons due, Professor Whitaker gave us the lessons for the rest of the course at once as opposed to splitting them up like the others did,” I explained.

“Oh how nice of her.” Kyllan said sarcastically.

We worked in tandem into the afternoon, breaking every now and then to grab a drink or stretch. The course load was daunting, but we made decent progress through the pile before finally breaking for lunch. It was nice with it being just the two of us again. I hadn’t realized how suffocating it had been having Sephira around until she wasn’t.

“Kyllan,” I started before being interrupted by a squeal. *Fuck.*

Sephira barrelled toward us, well toward Kyllan, with excitement. I rolled my eyes and just kept walking. He shot me an apologetic look before I entered the mess hall without either of them. I needed a break from that shitshow.

I’d just gotten in line when the pair of them came in, heading my way. I groaned with disappointment as they fell in behind me.

“Asena, apologies for interrupting your lunch but the commander requests your presence in his office,” A tall male said, appearing suddenly. *Where did he come from?*

“What would the commander want with her? She’s not even part of the army,” Sephira scoffed, with a snide smirk on her face.

I smiled sweetly as I turned to face her. “I may not be part of his army, but I am his daughter.”

The spiteful smirk fell from her face as understanding crept in. “But...but, why didn’t you ever say anything?” She stammered, trying to register the fact that she’d been an absolute wretch to her commander’s daughter.

Oh how I delighted in watching her mind at war with itself, karma really was a bitch. “It shouldn’t have mattered. Now, if you’ll excuse me, my presence is requested elsewhere. Kyllan, I’ll see you back at the common area to finish our studies.”

I whirled around and followed the towering male through the labyrinth of halls until we came upon the door to father's office. He knocked three times before a sharp "Enter." sounded through the door. Following orders, the male opened the door gesturing for me to lead the way.

Ah Asena, just who I wanted to see. Thank you Craven, go enjoy some lunch won't you?" Father exclaimed.

"What's all this about?" I questioned as the door clicked shut behind me.

"Well darling, I know you are aware that I was gone for a few days. I went to fetch your mother," he began.

He stood from his desk rounding the front, clad in his training armor, his golden stag pin on display just below his left shoulder, right over his heart. He crossed his legs, bracing himself against the desk with his arms outstretched behind him, hands gripping the edge.

"There's a meeting next week at the palace. Lady Selene has invited all of the High Lords and Ladies as well as their commanders and families here for the Summer Solstice dinner. What no one aside from the Commanders, Lords and Ladies knows is that there will be a meeting the next morning to discuss the finalization of the trials within the cave." He explained, rubbing at the stubble on his jaw.

So it was really happening then, they were in fact altering the cave to make the awakening more challenging. Suddenly I found myself thankful for the bit of training Kyllan and I were receiving.

"Naturally, once I find out the details I will invite you and Kyllan back here to strategize your best way out of the cave. I will be insisting that the trials only activate once someone with power crosses the threshold. Fucking Rohan, why did he have to suggest this, and this year of all years." He slammed a fist against his desk. "I don't like that you may be in danger and I won't be able to do a damned thing about it. This kingdom and its bullshit laws. Why is this the one that's sacred?"

"Father, you don't mean that. I'm sure this is all for the best, though scary as it may be, I'll come out the other side better for it. Stronger even." I hoped he couldn't see through the fake smile to the terror that lay beneath.

My mind was in shambles, cowering in the corner out of pure unadulterated fear. I hated not knowing what to expect. I had to fight

every urge in my body to crumple into a mess of tears and sobs.

He cleared his throat before continuing. “Naturally you’ll be invited to dinner, you can bring Kyllan if you’d like.”

I laughed nervously. “I actually think he’s going with Sephira. They’ve been spending quite a bit of time together.” I felt a familiar tension in my jaw at the thought of the raven haired girl who had taken such a liking to Ky.

“Ah. I see, should have figured she’d be there, seeing as she is Rohan’s daughter. Eh, better that you’re falling in with her than those two nimrods Beckett and Woodard. I swear sometimes I think those two are out to purposely make the unit worse. They used to have so much promise, then they changed after coming back from the break we took for last year’s Winter Solstice. Agh, it’s neither here nor there. Let’s go grab some lunch shall we?” He suggested.

I gave him a quick hug before making a beeline for the door, my hunger pushed thoughts of the cave to the back corner of my mind. We walked the majority of the way in comfortable silence before father asked about training with Bria.

“What have you learned this week?” He asked.

“Well, our first day here we did some defensive maneuvers which were a bit challenging. Then we moved to basics the following days, starting with balance and proper stances then we shifted to stances while holding our bows. Next week we are supposed to have a bit of target practice. Today is our day of rest though, so we can focus on our lessons for the academy.” I said, recounting the events of the week.

“Good. I’m glad you’ve got the basics down. Those will give you a good base to go off of regardless which army you end up in.” He smiled.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked as we rounded yet another corner heading towards the cafeteria.

“Of course my girl. Ask away.” He said.

“When I touch the crystal, does it matter which tower I grab?” I asked curiously.

Frowning he said, “unfortunately, no. While your Mother and I did both grab the center tower, I’m afraid I can’t be certain that one would grant you the power to manipulate mother earth as we do. The Crystal reads your soul and grants you what you need the most, what

your heart truly desires. It is clear that you wish to remain here with your mother and I, so I am sure the Crystal will see that as well. Are you worried that you won't be granted your antlers?"

"It *is* a concern, yes. I mean you and mother both came from different places, wouldn't logic dictate that it is very possible that I could end up in one of those?" I asked.

"My sweet girl. Sometimes I forget you aren't quite so little anymore. You truly are wise beyond your years, Asena. It is possible that you could end up in Mystaria with the power to control ice or even Vekroth with the power to control fire, yes. But as I said before, the Crystal will grant what your soul needs. Speaking of years..." he paused, "don't think your mother and I have forgotten your birthday. Even with the ceremony approaching, we will still celebrate. Twenty five is a milestone and deserves to be celebrated as such, I will hear no squabbling from you on the matter young lady." It was like he could see the storm of protest brewing inside me before I even had time to actualize it.

"Fine. But no one from the army please, just the three of us and Kyllan if he can come," I pleaded as we finally entered the cafeteria.

"Of course dear. Now it looks like he and Sephira are still here, go grab a plate and join them. I'll send for you two later when I'm ready for you." He said before turning and walking off toward the commanders table.

I made my way down the line in record time, smiling at the cooks and thanking them when they gave me my extra slice of crusty bread. A hush fell over the table as I sat next to Kyllan. I glanced up just in time to see the color drain from Sephira's face. *Oh this is going to be fun. How did I ever think this female was a fierce combatant?*

"Asena, I am so sorry. Had I known who you were I never would have..." she trailed off. "Well regardless, I'm sorry. I hope you can accept my apology." The smooth arrogance she had exhibited since our first meeting had been replaced by humble apprehension.

I just shook my head and continued eating my meal in silence.

"Ase, you're being rude. Seph is trying to apologize and you're just ignoring her, what's gotten into you?" Kyllan asked, a hint of annoyance to his tone.

I wasn't used to him being protective over someone other than me, and I didn't like it. Not because he was fawning over some other



girl, but because I still felt on edge even after the timid, doe eyed apology Sephira had offered me.

“Oh I’m sorry. Am I just supposed to forgive her because she apologized once she found out I was her commander’s daughter? That’s not how this works, Ky and you know it. I won’t be accepting your apology, Sephira, if you were truly sorry you never would have treated me as a threat in the first place when I did nothing but show you kindness.” I scoffed.

Grabbing my tray I moved to an empty table away from them. It wasn’t long before Kyllan came to join me.

“I’m sorry, Ase. I should have spoken up about the way she was treating you. I was just blinded by the affection she was showing me. Do you forgive me at least?” He asked, a touch of sadness lurking in his hazel eyes.

My anger melted away at seeing the sadness he held, I hated seeing the ones I cared for upset. It wasn’t like he could control how she acted toward me anyway. I supposed I could forgive him for something he couldn’t control.

“How could I not? I do need a date for my birthday dinner after all.” I nudged him in the side with my elbow, and smirked playfully at him.

“A date?” He asked, searching my eyes for some hidden blow that he was so sure would come.

“Yes, a date. With my parents, but still, a date nonetheless. I figure, start small, it can’t hurt right?” I shrugged.

He beamed at me, happiness radiating from his body the way heat would from a flame on a cool winter’s eve. It was contagious, and soon I was smiling as he wrapped an arm around me and placed a kiss atop my head before leaning his forehead against mine.

“Of course I’ll go with you. I can think of nothing I’d rather do.” He answered finally.

“So I take it this means you’ll go with me to the Solstice dinner as well? I don’t want to make things awkward for you, but I would like you to come, even if it’s just as my friend for now.” I added.

He let out a sigh and glanced at the table where he’d left Sephira, who was now scowling at him. *Well that settles that I guess.*

“Seems as if it’s already awkward,” he laughed nervously. “I would be honored, but I don’t have my dress clothes with me, I’ll

need to go into town and fetch some. Maybe we could go this afternoon before dinner and you could get a new gown?"

"Sounds like a plan, I'll get with father and let him know we will be leaving the barracks. Maybe with some luck I'll get him to purchase my gown as an early present." I giggled.

# CHAPTER



# 13

## *Asena*

Another week of training had passed, another week of grueling drills and pushing our bodies to the extent of their physical limits. Each night we would spill through the door to our cabin, trudging to our respective rooms only to collapse into heavy dreamless sleep. Yet, even as exhausted as the week had been, I couldn't wait to see what tonight would hold. I stepped into the long flowing gown and slid the delicate fabric over the curve of my hips before sliding my arms through the lace sleeves, positioning the dress in place over my shoulders. Emerald green lace leaves lined the top portion of the gown on either side of the plunging neckline, giving way to a full ombre green skirt that broke away from my body at my waistline. I ran a hand over the skirt, smoothing out any possible wrinkles and making sure it was in place before returning to the bathroom to fuss with my hair once more.

Kyllan had done me the favor of securing himself in his room, granting me the freedom to bustle around the bunker. Thank the Crystal for that, as this was now my third trip to the bathroom to make sure each strand of hair remained pinned in place. I reached behind me to secure the dress, I began zipping it when reality set in. *Fuck*. I groaned in protest, I did *not* want to have him zip this dress, my stomach was already full of nerves as it was.

Making sure I was completely ready, sans zipper, I walked to Kyllan's bedroom door, took a deep breath and knocked. *Knock. Knock. Knock.* A shirtless Kyllan answered the door, his blonde hair

slightly disheveled as if he'd been running a hand through it repeatedly. My eyes roved over his tanned stomach and a breath caught in my throat when I caught sight of the hint of muscles starting to form there. *Coming to train with The Brokenstone was already proving fruitful*, I thought to myself.

"I'm not quite ready....." He trailed off, stopping when he turned his attention to me, drinking in every ounce of my appearance. "Ase, you look stunning."

"Thank you, though I'm afraid I'm not quite ready yet either. I have a small problem, could you help me?" I questioned.

"Of course, what do you need, gorgeous?" He smiled.

I smiled as I spun around, positioning my back towards him. "Could you zip me up?" I asked, casting a glance over my shoulder at him.

A gentle brush of his finger slid down my spine as his hand found its way to the top of the zipper. He took a step closer, his hot breath on the nape of my neck as the sound of the zipper filled the air. He brought his hands to my shoulders, ran them down my arms and took a deep staggering breath, as if trying to regain control. Being this close to him was excruciating. *Get a hold of yourself, woman!* I told myself. I knew I *needed* to but did I *want* to?

Thoughts of him running those calloused hands over my bare skin began to creep their way into my mind, threatening to shatter any semblance of self control I had left. I spun in his arms to face him, sliding my hands up his bare chest and over his shoulders as he brought a hand beneath my chin tilting my head up causing me to look into those amber flecked eyes. He leaned down, his lips just mere inches from mine.

"Asena....," he breathed, his voice barely a whisper.

Tendrils of heat from his breath played at my lips, I swallowed down a gasp that begged to escape me. "Yes, Kyllan?"

He searched my eyes for an answer to the unasked question that lay between us. I rose up on my tiptoes as he slowly brought his lips down to meet mine, sending warmth running down my spine straight to my core. He moved closer, taking my head in his hands and deepened the kiss, his tongue swiping at my lips begging for entrance. I parted my lips ever so slightly, welcoming the intrusion before breaking away breathless.

I stood there looking at him awkwardly, “Hi, um, I need to just. Yep.”

Why the fuck couldn't I form a coherent sentence? By the Crystal, this was going to be a *long* night.

He laughed coolly. “Let me get dressed then we can go meet your father.” He turned to go back into his room and paused. “That was well worth the wait, if that's what you're wondering in that pretty little head of yours.” Tossing me a smile he closed the door leaving me there, dumbfounded.

Thoughts flooded my mind, competing with and, talking over one another. *How could he be so calm about this? Isn't he the one that wanted this relationship to come to fruition for years now? More importantly, why the hell was I freaking out about this? It's not like I did anything wrong here, I mean sure I may not be one hundred percent certain of what the future would hold, but I was fairly certain that Kyllan is my mate.* I paced back and forth for a few minutes to calm myself down before going back to the bathroom to do one last hair check, I'm sure there were a few stray hairs out of place.

I re-pinned the last piece of hair back, leaving the lower portion loose and flowy creating a waterfall of red curls that cascaded down my back stopping just above the top of the zipper to my dress. Taking a few steps back I gave myself a once over in the mirror, the smokey charcoal tint on my eyelids accentuated my blue eyes. Satisfied with the final product, I walked to my room and slid my feet into the glitzy silver heels Bria helped me pick out last week during our trip out to the shopping district of Verena.

The shops truly outdid themselves with decor for the Solstice celebration. Strands of ivy were woven around every rounded archway with fae lights strung around each awning. Brilliant orange and purple lilies were in full bloom lining the cobblestone street on either side, accented with large pale blue and white hydrangea blooms. It turns out that the decor that was being assembled when father, Kyllan and I first arrived at the capital was not for the Awakening as we originally thought, but the Solstice celebration. A fact I learned from a shopkeeper when I complimented her fragrant blush colored peony garland hanging around the checkout counter. She informed me that the decor for this year's Awakening would be unlike anything the Kingdom had ever seen. Apparently every one hundred years each capital went completely over the top with its

decor, leaving it up until each soldier found their way to their new home.

Kyllan's door creaked open, making my head whip up at the sound. I took in his full form, clad in a sleek charcoal gray suit, complete with an emerald green tie and kerchief tucked neatly into the pocket of his jacket to match my dress. Mother above, he looked positively handsome, there was something different in the way he carried himself that night as he strode to the bathroom to fuss with his blonde locks, disheveling it just so.

He sauntered over and placed a gentle kiss on my cheek before saying, "Are you ready gorgeous?"

"As ever!" I exclaimed.

He offered me his elbow as he held the door open for me, I took his arm and together we set off for father's office. My nerves were getting the best of me as we strolled through the barracks, twisting and turning through the maze that led us to our destination. It wasn't very often that I got to see Lady Selene, and I'd never met any of the other High Council or their commanders. As if sensing my nervousness, Kyllan reached over and placed his hand over mine, stroking the backs of my knuckles ever so slightly as we walked in comfortable silence the rest of the way.

The door to the office was open when we arrived. Inside stood father in his traditional sage green suit and black tie, which was being adjusted by mother who wore a sleek black floor length gown that shimmered ever so slightly in the low light.

"Elora dear, our girl is here, and blessed be she looks simply stunning." Father beamed as his gaze landed on me.

Mother spun around to face me and inhaled sharply before saying, "green really is your color, Asena. You look positively beautiful." She pulled me in for a hug before turning her attention to Kyllan. "And you young man, you don't look so bad either. Roarke, why didn't you tell me Kyllan was coming?"

"I wasn't certain he was dear, otherwise I certainly would have. However, we can discuss this later, we best get a move on if we want a word with Lady Selene before the others arrive." Father stated before pushing open a small section of the wall behind his desk.

Of course there would be a hidden entrance to a tunnel in his office. I'd bet my weight in silver leaf that the tunnel would lead all the way to Antheia Palace. Father motioned for us to enter the tunnel

before him. Doing as he asked, I walked forward and was greeted by a gentle, cool breeze when I stepped over the threshold and into the tunnel. Kyllan and mother followed quickly after with father bringing up the rear, securing the entrance once more after making his way in.

We walked a short distance before coming to a long winding staircase, mother and I shared a displeased grunt before removing our shoes and walking up barefoot. A chill ran through my veins as my bare foot touched the first step. Slowly we trudged up the staircase. Up and up and up, around and around and around. I stopped short of the top to steady myself against the wall when I felt a gentle hand at the small of my back. Kyllan. He gave me a look that asked for reassurance that I was okay without speaking a word. I gave him a smile and a small nod before letting him help me the rest of the way up.

Once we'd reached the landing father said, "alright my beautiful ladies, that's all the stairs until we reach the castle, I promise." He held up two fingers—his pointer and middle—slightly overlapped, the Brokenstone hand signal used when taking an oath. "Now it's not too much farther but stay close, the tunnel splits up ahead taking you to different parts of the capital, don't want anyone getting lost."

"After you sir," Kyllan responded.

Following behind him we came upon the split and stayed to the left, father glanced over his shoulder to ensure everyone had in fact made the right turn. We continued down the path until we came to a large circular wooden double door. *This must be the entrance to the castle*, I thought. Sure enough, father lifted the same key he used to unlock the training arena and slid it into the lock. A loud click echoed through the tunnel just before he pulled the key out of the lock and turned the knob, opening the door inward towards us.

I looked around in awe. I'd only been to Antheia Palace once before, but it was nothing like I remembered. The door we'd come through brought us out in the great hall, its walls draped with bronze and green velvet. Three ornate chandeliers hung in a row down the center of the room, on either end of the hall stood a towering set of bronze metal doors with a lavish emerald green design on each set.

The doors on the far end of the hall swung open, and through them stepped the High Lady Selene. Her long silver hair was pulled back in the middle with two small braids on either side of the portion that was pulled back framing her tall pale antlers. Her remaining hair fell in long loose curls down to her hips. A shimmery white floor

length gown clung to her figure, a slit ran up the side showing off her long dark slender legs. Her right hand was clinched around her bronze staff topped with a stag, whose antlers held a large malachite crystal that seemed to have a faint glow emulating from it. Taking all of her in, she looked ethereal, shimmering in white with hair and antlers to match.

“Roarke, how is my *favorite* commander?” She asked as she approached.

Father chuckled beside me. “I’m your *only* commander, I’d damn well better be your favorite. You look lovely, Lady Selene. You already know Elora, my wife,” he said, gesturing to mother before looking at Kyllan and I. “And this lovely young lady is our pride and joy. Lady Selene, meet Asena Montalli, our daughter and the gentleman standing next to her is Kyllan Vernize. These are the two I was telling you about.”

She greeted us with a warm smile. “I’ve heard quite a bit about both of you, and not just from the Commander here. All good things though, I promise.” She held up the Brokenstone oath hand signal before turning back to father. “Roarke, let’s go into the other room to discuss our plans for the meeting tomorrow morning before the other guests arrive.”

“Oh yes right,” he responded.

She turned and I noted the brilliant green ink that stained her shoulder blade, winding up to her neck. Father turned back and gave me a knowing smile as he followed her through a small set of doors on the right side of the hall. *Well, I guess I won’t know what that’s about until it’s too late.* I thought to myself.



# CHAPTER



# 14

## *Asena*

Guests started arriving not too long after father disappeared with Lady Selene. The first to arrive was Rastia's High Lady Reyna and her husband Adriel along with her commander Lysa. The dark faeries were beautiful in their own way, standing tall and proud with their expansive black feathered wings held high to ensure they never touched the ground. They, like that of the elven from Herbexia, had antlers that adorned the tops of their heads. However, their antlers were quite different from ours as they were intricately twisted and not quite as tall.

Lady Reyna and mother were exchanging pleasantries when the High Lord Theoden from Loritholien entered along with his commander, Caedric. The two light fae males were clad in matching pale gray suits. They too held their white feathered wings high as they walked the length of the great hall to meet us. They were mere feet from us when the front doors opened yet again and in came Elberien's shapeshifter High Lady Raeghan alongside her wife and commander, Camyla. The shifters were in their human form tonight and each donned a floor length silk gown in complementing shades of orange.

The wolfkin High Lord Rohan from Drennadale was the next to enter. It was no surprise that he left his very pregnant wife at home and opted to bring only his commander, Atreyus and of course his petulant daughter, Sephira. White wolf fur poked out from the tops of the male's black suits, running up to their pointed wolf ears and

over the tops of their heads. Hands that resembled that of an elongated wolf's paw with long sharp claws hung at the end of their coat sleeves. I made a quick mental note to avoid the pair of wolfkin for the remainder of their time here. That shouldn't be a problem as I'd planned to avoid the High Lord's daughter before the night ever began.

Lady Selene emerged from the room where her and father disappeared to and motioned for me to join them. I quickly made my way to the door before I could draw any attention to myself.

"I must return to the dinner party, your father will fill you in on everything." And with that she was gone, gliding elegantly away as if she were floating rather than walking.

"Asena," Father began. "Lady Selene believes she can get the other members of the High Council to see that our argument to delay the start of the trials until after you receive your gift is sound. She is prepared to start planting the seed in the doubters' minds tonight after the dessert course when it will be asked that any children and spouses are excused to the ballroom for cocktails and dancing. Yes, that includes you."

I groaned in protest and he continued on. "You should know by now that I will of course give you all the information I am able when it comes to your safety in the cave. Yours and Kyllan's, mind you. Who, by the way, I am delighted to see accepted your invitation. Were you wrong about his feelings for Sephira?"

I blushed before saying, "well I'm not quite sure if I was wrong about them or if the prospect of being my escort both tonight and to my birthday dinner was the better offer." Father gave me an incredulous look as I continued. "I know I said I wanted to wait, but what if I am worried about something that won't happen? I would miss out on these moments with Kyllan and at the end of the day I don't know if that is something I can willfully do. So, I told him we could start with a date and take it slow until after the Awakening, this way if we are torn apart it will be over before it really starts."

"And if you're not then you've not wasted either of your time. Always the wise my little wolf, always wise." Father placed a kiss atop my head and looked at me with pride before saying, "well, we should get back to it, I'm sure my absence has been noticed by now."

We reentered the great hall to find that High Lady Draya and her commander Xylia, both water nymphs from Briaxoth had arrived as

well as the High Lord Castian, his wife Daleka and his commander Amaya, all frost elves from Mystaria. Which meant we were just waiting on the dragonians from Vekroth. I took my place by Kyllan's side and joined in the conversation he was having with Lady Reyna, Lord Castian and Lady Daleka when the front doors opened and the dragonians entered the hall.

I recognized the High Lord Elias from photos I'd seen at Greenbriar, his large dragon wings were tucked in tight and his red scaled horns stood tall atop his head. My gaze was drawn however to his commander, whom I did not recognize or know the name of. He was the most attractive male I'd ever seen, and though I did not know him, there was an air of familiarity drawing me in. Tall jet black horns protruded from his hairline straight up into the air, curving back slightly. At the base of them lie a bed of raven colored locks that I had the sudden urge to grip between my fingers. A small stark white streak ran through his dark hair, falling in a soft curl against his forehead. His red and black wings settled into a relaxed position as he walked toward Lady Selene and greeted her with one hell of a smile.

"Why yes, we are quite excited for the awakening next week aren't we, Ase?" Kyllan said, flashing me an irritated smile.

*Shit.* Smiling I said, "And a bit anxious to boot. I feel as if we've been waiting for the Crystal to seal our fates for an eternity now."

"Ah yes, the waiting game. I don't envy either of you. Though my awakening was one hundred years ago, I still remember it as though it was yesterday. In fact, Asena, if I remember correctly your Mother and her friend, what was her name? Ah yes, Morena, were awakened that year as well," Castian stated, with a distant, reminiscent look in his eyes.

"Yes, mother went through that same year. I can't be certain about her friend though, she doesn't mention her much." I replied hesitantly.

"Ha!" He barked out a laugh. "I should hope not, with what happened at the base of the dais." I got the distinct feeling that if we'd been anywhere but inside the walls of the castle, he'd have spit in disgust at the thought of the events that occurred that day in the cave.

*How?* I opened my mouth to respond when Lady Selene's voice began to reverberate throughout the room ushering us all into the dining hall. I shot Kyllan a look to help me keep an eye on Lord

Castian. I needed to find out if he knew the truth about what happened in the cave with Morena or if he was merely circulating gossip.

As we took our seats at the dining table next to father and mother I found myself positioned directly across from the dragonian commander. *I. Am. In. Trouble.* Keeping my focus off of him was going to be a task, forget trying to have a conversation while he was this close to me. *Who is this male?*

I did fairly well, I thought, making it most of the way through the salad and soup courses before my attention found its way across the table to the mysterious dragonian commander. The breath was stolen from my lungs as his ocean blue eyes met mine and he tilted his head to the left ever so slightly, studying me as if he were a hunter and I were his prey. Chills ran down my spine as his eyes roved unapologetically over my face and down to my breasts.

Kyllan, oblivious to the actual source of my chills, stood and wrapped his jacket around my shoulders before retaking his seat beside me. Thankful for the additional covering his jacket provided I gathered the material at the front before placing a swift kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you, I was getting a bit chilly.” I offered him a small smile before returning my attention back to my meal.

# CHAPTER



# 15

*Ryker*

Father was listening to Commander Atreyus drone on about the wolfkin's potential army recruits out of this year's Awakening participants and though I really *should have* been paying attention, I couldn't be bothered to look away from the delectable female across from me. I spotted her immediately when I entered the palace, her red hair a beacon calling out to me from across the room. This enchantress was completely and utterly human and yet, somehow she'd rendered me useless without so much as lifting a finger. *I need to get it together. She is just a vilande for fucks sake, she might not even end up in Vekroth*, I thought to myself. *But Mother above save me if she does.*

The waiter made his way over with the salad course. *Thank fuck.* Something to concentrate on other than the way the lace of her dress clung to her perfect body, accentuating the swell of her perky breasts. Try as I might it was impossible to avoid looking at her, her presence like a wildfire set ablaze directly across from me. *One quick glance won't hurt right?* Apparently she had the same thought. As I returned my gaze to her I locked onto her eyes, the color of the sky on a clear summer's day.

I drank her in, taking note of every inch of that devastatingly beautiful face of hers before trying to memorize her curves. Returning my gaze to her eyes there was a hint of familiarity there, peaking my curiosity. *Who was this little wildfire?* I knew she had to

be that elven commander Roarke's daughter with the way the two of them resembled one another, but *what was her name?*

The blonde male next to her stood and placed his jacket on her shoulders sending a surge of jealousy shuddering through me, casting a wave of heat through the room. *Get it the fuck together Ryker. You can not harm anyone here, much less a vilande, now if he ends up in Vekroth that's a different story. I'll work his ass twice as hard for having the audacity to even look at her.* I ran a hand through my hair and let out a breath. *I. Am. In. Trouble.*

"Everything okay son?" Father asked, a warning flashed in his eyes.

"Just peachy. Contemplating the new recruits this year, I'm hopeful for some of Sunniva Academy's best and brightest and maybe even a few vilande from the other realms. Pure strength isn't everything, you need a few good strategists on your side to make plans and run the numbers." I replied, quickly flicking my eyes to the two vilande across from me then back again.

"Right you are son, and *that* is why I made you the commander of the Crimson Legion," he said as he clasped me on the shoulder.

I'd just finished my soup as the waiters emerged through the swinging doors that I assumed led to the kitchen, with several plates of honey glazed lamb chops accompanied by a sweet nectarine and tomato salsa.

"Lady Selene I do believe you've outdone yourself this evening, this meal looks simply divine," Lady Camyla said as the plates were placed in front of us.

"I have to agree with Lady Camyla," Father's voice bellowed down the table towards our host.

Keep kissing ass father. It won't cause them to view us any differently than they do now, King Ravi saw to that. By dismantling the throne of the High King and renouncing his crown, yes, he gave the realms their freedom to do what is best for their people but he really fucked Vekroth over in the process. The Dragonian people are looked down on by all other inhabitants of Kinbrolds. I'm not sure if they think one of the royal bloodline, wherever they are, will get a wild hair and try to reclaim the throne or if they just view us as lesser for some damned reason.

The sound of laughter, a siren's song coming from the opposite side of the table clawed at the stone walls around my heart. My head

snapped forward, my gaze landing on that brilliant smile plastered on her face. Her attention turned toward me and her smile began to fade, replaced by a look of silent fear. *Now, now, no need to be afraid, Little Wildfire.* I needed to put some space between us and soon, before I acted on impulse and made a fool of myself over a female that I didn't even know the name of.

"Before dessert I'd like to invite you all into the ballroom to enjoy a few cocktails and Greenbriar's orchestra. High Council and Commanders, if you could remain behind for just a moment we will join your families in the ballroom shortly," Lady Selene said from the head of the table.

As the little wildfire stood, she shucked off the jacket the blonde male next to her placed on her shoulders during dinner and handed it back to him. He took her by the hand and led her from the room, setting me on edge as I ground my teeth in an effort not to incinerate him. *Breath, you hot head.*

"Now that we are alone I'd like to be candid with all of you as to why I have decided to host the High Courts here this evening. As you all know, the Awakening Ceremony commences one week from today. Lord Rohan suggested we add additional trials within the cave to truly test the strength of the participants. While we all agreed, I do have a caveat I'd like to add. I would like to suggest the trials be sensitive to magik," Lady Selene stated as she looked around the table.

Did she really need to spell that out? I mean what lunatic would send their possible recruits into fire, literally.

"Sensitive in what way?" Lord Castian inquired.

"If I'm understanding correctly, I think it's safe to assume we can't expect vilande to fight their way through magikal trials," I said lazily.

"That's exactly what I expect. How will we know if they are truly worthy of receiving their gifts if we don't test them beforehand," Lord Rohan retorted.

*Apparently this one.* I thought to myself.

"And what would you suggest we do if none of them make it through? What would we tell folks like Commander Montalli here who's own daughter is set to Awaken this year? Please enlighten us," Father said, motioning at no one in general.

“I’m inclined to agree with Rohan. It’s easy to fight magik with magik, untrained or not. It is however quite a bit more difficult to use wit and cunning against it. This truly would separate the strong from the weak,” Lady Raeghan spoke from a few seats down.

One by one the other lords and ladies surrounding the long marble table began to shake their heads in agreement. I shook my head in disbelief and stared at the shitstorm that was brewing before my eyes, this would not end well.

“Are you all fucking daft? We can not send hundreds of vilande to face the trials that have been suggested by the lot of you. If we are sending them in there we *must* scale back the complexity of the trials!” I stood in my seat, slamming my hands on the table to drive my point home.

“I agree with Commander Ryker, we can not expect these untrained vilande to navigate through a menagerie of elements and shifting walls within the cave if they are too complex or threatening,” Castian spoke, his voice commanding the attention of the others in the room.

I was taken aback. I expected him to side with Rohan as he usually did on matters of the High Council, maybe he wasn’t as much of a son of a bitch as I thought he was. Though I know he still held resentment for our kind since father was the one who claimed his father’s life on the battlefield during The Great War. The Dragonian’s followed King Ravi along with the Elven, Dark and Light Fae, as well as the Water Nymphs. The Frost Elves, Shifters, Wolfkins and Sprites fell in line behind Edmar yet it seemed today’s High Courts had forgotten where their ancestors’ loyalties lay all those years ago.

“I’m afraid we don’t have enough time to continue this discussion tonight, we do however need to come to a decision that we can all agree upon,” Lady Selene spoke as she stood from the head of the table. “As well as finalize the trials and get them in place before the new moon the night before the Ceremony. I’d like us all to meet back here tomorrow morning at first light, before you dispel back to your home realms. Can you all agree to that?”

Ayes resounded around the table, several members of the council nodding their heads in agreement. I took that moment to make my exit, unable to tolerate being in the presence of such willful ignorance any longer. I slipped from the room unnoticed and followed the sound of the orchestra to the ballroom where I was sure my little wildfire would be.



# CHAPTER



## 16

### *Asena*

The orchestra played the last notes of *Incandescence* as Kyllan twirled me around the dance floor, catching me as my footing slipped and bringing me into a low dip without missing a step himself. He held me there for a moment, his hungry eyes pinning me in place before he brought me upright again.

“Thank you for catching me, I’d have died of embarrassment had I fallen,” I whispered as the music began again.

Kyllan smiled, “I’ll always catch you, but I think you know that already.”

His hand settled on my hip as he began leading me through the next dance. I took his left hand in my right one, placing my left on his shoulder, careful to keep my elbow level and followed him through the steps of the classic waltz.

“Turn it off,” he ordered.

I looked at him, bewildered by the command.

“Your mind, Asena. Turn. It. Off.” He elaborated.

“I can’t.” I admitted sheepishly.

“You *can*. You deserve peace, even if it’s just for one night.” He retorted, his gaze narrowing.

“I suppose I can try, for you.” I said with a resounded sigh.

He gave me a hopeful grin as I closed my eyes, letting myself get lost in the music. It was nice to let it all go even if for just one evening. No worries of night visions, training, lessons or the Awakening causing my mind to war with itself. I opened my eyes to find myself able to appreciate the beauty within the walls of the castle. Large arched windows lined either side of the ballroom's walls. Through the left side you could see into the courtyard where a massive oak tree stood, towering above the castle. Through the right you could see all of Verena, strands of fae lights twinkling against the darkness the night brought about, embers from the fire pits located around the town dying out as they made their descent back to the stone paths.

A warmth crept its way towards me from the doorway at my back. I needn't turn around to know who stood there adjusting the lapels on his jet black suit jacket before making his entrance. Heat flushed my skin as he walked past, a tendril of his power all he granted me as the Dragonian Commander took Sephira by the hand and led her to the dance floor.

She beamed at him with joy in her bright blue eyes. He led her around the dance floor with fluid grace, the skirt of her silver gown shifting with each movement of her feet. The pair of them looked like they belonged together, shadows clung to them as they stared into each other's eyes. His wings were tucked in tight as he spun her out and back in, catching her in a way that positioned her back against his front. Her gaze shot to me and she smiled coyly, as if to say *I won*.

"Can I cut in here?"

I jumped at hearing my father's voice. I'd been so enthralled by watching them I hadn't noticed the High Council enter the room, much less father approach us.

"Of course sir. Do you mind if I steal a dance with Elora?" Kyllan asked.

"I'm sure she'd love that Kyllan, thank you son." Father clasped him on the shoulder before taking my hand and spinning me so that I no longer faced the commander and Sephira.

"Need I remind you, darling daughter, that it was *you* who chose to act on your feelings and bring Kyllan here tonight?" He asked through a tight lipped smile.

I snapped my head up to look at him.

“Don’t think I haven’t seen you eyeing Commander Ryker since he walked through the doors of the palace this evening. And if I’ve noticed, I can assure you others have as well. Namely Kyllan, whom you brought here. You must remember that while you are a guest in the capital you are an extension of myself and by association, Lady Selene as it is she who suggested you come here for your training as opposed to staying in Peoria.” He reminded me.

Ashamed. Embarrassed. I thought I’d been subtle with my stolen glances at the commander, who’s name I now knew, *thank you father*. Apparently, I’d been wrong. Another realization dawned on me, as I thought, *if they were here that meant the first step in the plan for the Awakening was over*. I turned my gaze back toward father and opened my mouth to speak only to be cut off.

“I can not give you details here but I can tell you that things are not going according to plan. Lady Selene and I have a few minds to change or things will not go well for yourself, Kyllan or any other participant in this year’s Awakening for that matter,” His voice was solemn as he spoke in a hushed tone. Concern deepened the small lines around his eyes.

“When will you know more?” I asked, my voice hushed.

“The High Council will be meeting tomorrow morning to discuss the details of the trials and where they are to be set. Surprisingly, the Dragonian’s are on our side, which is probably doing us more harm than good, but I won’t turn down the support. For now, let us enjoy the remainder of our evening.” He said, twirling me out then back in again.

I rested my head against his chest as he hummed along to the music, finishing our dance by twirling me out of his arms and into the center of the dance floor. With a low bow he set off to find mother, leaving me to wait for Kyllan.

“Enjoying yourself?” Lady Selene asked as she approached from my left.

“Yes, quite a bit. Thank you for inviting us this evening. It’s been... Well, it’s been quite some time since I’ve allowed myself to take a break and quiet my mind,” I admitted, feeling the glamor of the evening overtake me.

She offered me a glass of red wine as she placed her hand at my back and ushered me to the back of the room toward a small seating area. She took her place on one of the sage green couches located there, gesturing for me to sit across from her on the other.

“I’m glad,” she said before lowering her voice, “Your father told me of your night visions. I’d like to know more about them, if that’s okay. I was studying to be a healer of the mind before taking my position as High Lady.”

My mind raced for a moment with thoughts. *She wants to help me, but why?* “Of, of course,” I stammered out, caught off guard by her drop in decorum to ask such a question.

My instincts told me that her intentions were altruistic in nature, and the healer in her wanted nothing more than to help offer me some relief from the night visions that had plagued me for years.

“Wonderful, I’d like to meet tomorrow after the council departs to get started, provided things go well. For now, go enjoy your evening.” She grinned, swirling the wine in her glass before taking a sip. “I’ll send word with your father when I’m ready for you.”

“Thank you Lady Selene, truly,” I said, feeling grateful and relieved to have someone outside of my parents and Kyllan to confide in, before standing and returning to the dance floor.

I scanned the dancing crowd, searching for Kyllan’s golden locks. My gaze finally settled on him across the room standing with Lord Castian and Lady Raeghan. I made my way over to him only to have my view of him obstructed by a pile of black curls.

“Apologies for the intrusion, High Lord, High Lady. Kyllan, can I steal you for a moment?” Her sing-song voice was laced with a touch of malice.

“I suppose so, but only for a moment. I’m waiting for Asena to finish her conversation with Lady Selene,” he said, excusing himself and following Sephira.

She led him to the dance floor and held her hand out, with a curtsy. *Is she serious right now?* I thought to myself as I watched in disbelief. He took her hand in his with a bow, placing his other on her waist and began to lead her around the room. She glanced back in my direction, ensuring I was out of earshot when she began speaking to him. I needed to get closer to them. I didn’t trust Sephira, especially when it came to Kyllan, who, for whatever reason, was so easily entranced by her.

I was almost to them when I heard her say in a hushed tone, “not here, follow me.”

“Then where?” Kyllan inquired.

“Meet me in the dining hall. I’m going there now, wait a few minutes then head that way. If you’re not there in ten minutes I will assume you don’t want to know. Just remember I tried to warn you,” she said before leaving the ballroom.

*What was so important that she needed to warn Kyllan, and why couldn’t she speak of it openly?* I thought to myself and decided on the one thing I was certain of, I needed to know what she knew. Kyllan moved about the room, most likely looking for me, leaving me free to dart from the room. I slunk down the hallway, remaining in the shadows as I watched her toss a quick glance over her shoulder before entering the dining hall. Quickly, I hunkered down in a door frame, trying to remain hidden as a set of light footsteps approached. I turned my head to see Kyllan coming down the hall, I sent a silent prayer to the Mother hoping that he wouldn’t see me. I let out a deep breath when he too entered the dining hall. I stood and smoothed out the skirt of my dress before planting myself against the wall straining to listen to the conversation in the room beyond.

“What’s this about, why all the secrecy?” Kyllan asked.

“The Awakening, there’s an added element this year. All the participants will have to fight their way through nine trials,” she explained, in a low and urgent tone. *No shit. We knew that already.*

“After we’ve received our gifts I assume,” Kyllan asked, returning the hushed tone.

“Not if my father has his way.” She really was the spawn of evil, yet I could appreciate her plight at that moment.

I needed to get back to the ballroom before my presence was missed, and before these two found me eavesdropping. I really didn’t want to explain that one. I’d made it about halfway down the hall when I heard footsteps approaching, I cast a glance over my shoulder assuming it was Kyllan and Sephira yet no one was there. It was then that I felt that familiar tendril of heat wrap itself around me, winding its way through my veins and wrapping around every nerve, simultaneously sending a wave of terror and excitement through me.

# CHAPTER



## 17

*Ryker*

The sight of her in another's arms set me on edge, taking all of my focus to contain the fire that threatened to erupt from my body. Rohan's daughter was pretty enough, but she was nothing compared to the little wildfire. Unfortunately, she'd have to do, for now. I approached her and held out my left hand, bowing my head slightly, I looked up as she placed her hand in mine with a slight curtsy and a smile. As I led her around the dance floor I kept my wings tucked in tight, uncomfortably aware of the number of eyes trained on us.

"Your father truly is a piece of work Sephira." I kept my voice low when I spoke and a half smile on my face. I didn't need anyone overhearing this conversation.

"Trust me I'm all too aware. I say my blessings daily to the Mother that the Crystal chose a different path for me than the one he had laid out," she scoffed, pausing to give me a quizzical look. "What did he do this time?"

I leaned in close, my lips brushing her ear ever so slightly and said, "He has made it his latest mission to ensure not one vilande makes it out of the cave. Do not react, people are watching."

I pulled back and looked at her, making sure she understood what I'd told her. I needed her to tell the blonde vilande that currently had his hands on my little wildfire. I had this innate need to protect her, and I would do everything in my power to ensure her safety while keeping diplomacy between the realms in tact.

“Tell no one Sephira. I mean this,” I said, glancing at the blonde male then back at her.

“I understand. If you’ll excuse me, I need to powder my nose.” And off she went, black curls bouncing with each step.

My gaze followed her as she disappeared from the room. Utterly useless, truly. I navigated my way across the floor, smiling when I spotted Lady Selene seated at the back of the room with that gorgeous little creature. I drew closer to the pair and stopped when I was within earshot of their conversation.

“Your father told me of your night visions. I’d like to know more about them if that’s okay. I was studying to be a healer of the mind before taking my position as High Lady,” Selene spoke in a lowered tone.

*Night visions? It couldn’t be.* I’d been so focused on keeping myself in check I hadn’t noticed. I cast a glance in their direction, bringing my wine glass up to my lips and taking a long slow drink. Sure enough there she sat, the female that invaded my dreams each night. A part of me wondered if she had the same visions each night, and if so is that why she seemed terrified of me? Did she think I was the one who took her?

“Of, of course.” *Good girl.*

“Wonderful, I’d like to meet tomorrow after the council departs to get started, if things go well. For now, go enjoy your evening,” Selene said with a joyful tone.

*Oh, she will Selene, she will.* I just needed to get her alone, to show her I was not the big bad wolf that haunted her night visions. To let her know they couldn’t be as bad as they seemed, that she was not alone in them. That I too had to relive the same horrible vision each night when I closed my eyes. But what would she think of me? How would this beautifully broken soul react when I made my admission of guilt? The one where I couldn’t save her.

My mind began waging a war against my continence over whether I should in fact tell her or not. I walked aimlessly about the room lost in thought when I felt a chill scratching at the wall of heat I kept in place whenever I was away from Vekroth.

“Odd isn’t it. That you and I would find ourselves on the same side,” Castian said as he moved to face me.

“I thought the same, so I have to wonder, what are you playing at?” There was no way this asshole didn’t have some underlying

reason to be on the right side of things for once in his miserable life.

He brought a frost-ridden hand up to stroke his jaw, a blue ethereal glow hid beneath his skin as he tried to keep his magik in check. My eyes caught on the sliver of sodalite that was embedded in the silver ring on his pointer finger. I mindlessly ran a finger over the band I wore on my middle finger, feeling the rough edges of flames carved within the black band. I dropped my gaze to the large garnet that lay mounted in the center. I'd never forget the day I received this ring, for it was the same day the wings at my back and the jet black horns on my head sprouted from my body. While most Vakna, or awakened, didn't receive their bands until they were promoted from Cadet to Warrior, father was so filled with pride he couldn't wait to give me the band he'd commissioned.

"Am I not allowed to be on the right side of things for once?" He asked with a tick in his jaw, sounding a little defensive.

I chuckled. "Oh you can do as you please, just don't get in my way in the process. Rohan seems to be personally seeing to it that every member of the High Council pushes the vote through to test the moxy of this year's participants." I nodded across the room where Rohan stood with Theoden and Caedric.

"He really is a bad dog, shame his mother didn't shove his face in shit more often," Castain said with a straight face before bursting out laughing.

I choked on the sip of wine I'd just taken, trying to control my laughter. *Maybe he has changed.* I turned my attention back to Rohan when I noticed a pile of black curls exit the room near where the blonde vilande stood. He looked around then shot from the room a moment later, toward Sephira. I smiled darkly to myself, *good.* Now I just needed him to tell his date what he was about to learn.

"What are we laughing at boys?" Draya asked coolly as she sauntered up to us. Her blue sequin dress shimmering in the light from the glass chandeliers that hung from the high ceiling.

"Oh, just a joke between old friends." Castian flashed me an unsettling grin.

"I didn't realize you two were close, though I suppose I shouldn't be surprised as you two do seem rather chummy over here by your lonesome." She blinked her long lashes seductively, looking at me with hunger in her green eyes.



I leaned down and whispered in her ear, “I’m afraid water and fire don’t mix well my dear. Though it is a shame, a male like me could really get drunk on those curves of yours.”

She gasped with excitement as I softly chuckled, releasing a tendril of heat to wrap itself around her. I’d need to show her a little of the attention she was seeking if I was to sway her to our side, we’d only need two more votes to stop the trials from affecting the vilande until after they were awakened.

Castian cleared his throat and asked in a low voice, “so at the risk of being drowned, can I ask where you stand on the matter of the trials?”

She cast a quick glance around to make sure we were free from prying ears. “Of course, Lord Castian. I don’t share the same crassness that Rohan does on the matter.” She paused, reaching a hand up to toy with a loose strand of her brown hair. “I do believe that we should be testing the vilande against the magik of the realms, but not before they are awakened. However, if the vote doesn’t go our way, I do plan on backing Ryker in the fact that the trials should be lessened from what was initially suggested. So I’d suggest bringing two plans for your trials, boys.”

Castian and I shared a smile as she tossed back the remainder of the wine in her glass. “Thanks for warming me up, Ryker,” she said with a flirtatious wink before slinking off to rejoin the throng of Vakna on the dancefloor.

“That should do it, right? With the folks that are locked in on our side, Selene’s proposal should be pushed through.” Castian clinked his glass against mine, flashing a smile.

“It would seem so, if you’ll excuse me.” I clasped him on the shoulder and gave him a nod of thanks before I walked off towards the hall. Something was still eating at me, yet I couldn’t figure out what. Maybe a bit of fresh air was precisely what I needed.

# CHAPTER



# 18

*Ryker*

My magik roamed freely in the hall, heat radiated off of me in waves and I was thankful to finally get some much needed relief. Roarke's intriguing daughter had me wound tight without so much as saying a word. As much as I wanted to drop to my knees and beg the Mother above to send her to Vekroth, maybe it was best if I left this one up to fate. With the unrest between the realms I didn't need another distraction at home, not when I'd been freshly promoted to Commander less than a year ago.

Elijah, the previous Commander of the Crimson Legion, was a fierce warrior and one of father's oldest friends. But lately, he hadn't been running training properly, he'd gotten sloppy and so had our units. He'd let too many things slide for it to go unnoticed. When father checked in with him he lost it, started spouting about how the darkness would come for all of us one day soon then collapsed on the floor. He woke the next day with no memory of the conversation.

A wave of heat came rushing back to me carrying the scent of lemon and sunshine, bringing me back to the present. It seemed I wasn't alone in the hall, another must be hidden but I hadn't noticed anyone missing from the ballroom before I took my leave other than the blonde vilande and Sephira. Curiosity beseeched me to venture further down the hall, keeping my footsteps light.

I'd made it exactly twelve steps when I spotted the emerald green waterfall spilling into the hallway from the doorway that led into the courtyard. As if acting on instinct, my power sent a tendril of heat

towards her, sliding up her body and wrapping itself around her. Oh Little Wildfire what are you doing hiding out here, and all alone. My gaze darted to the door at the end of the hall as it opened. *Shit.*

The heat from the hall recoiled as I called it back to me, flattening myself against a nearby doorframe. I laughed to myself, I was no better than the female just up the hall from me. Both of us remained hidden as Sephira and the blonde male hurried past us. I sent a silent thank you up to the Mother, I did not need to be noticed lingering in a seemingly empty hallway with the daughter of another Commander, specifically one that hated my kind.

My ears perked up at the sound of rustling fabric. Quickly, I stood and adjusted the lapels of my black suit before stepping out into the hall, sending out yet another tendril of heat towards her. I watched as it reached her, her back straightened before she slowly turned to face me. Though she tried to hide it, I caught the curiosity that lay below the fear in her eyes.

By the Crystal, she was stunning. The way her brilliant red hair fell framed her face perfectly, while her high cheekbones stained pink with blush and her full lips came together to create a masterpiece. I took a step toward her, hoping she wouldn't let the fear in her veins overtake the curiosity that played at the corner of her blue eyes and run from the hall.

"Now, now, little wildfire, what are you doing out here all alone?" I said, coolly.

"I'm not a little anything and I was looking for my *date.*" Provocation rang through her tone, where fear had lived only moments ago, now fire bloomed in her eyes.

I chuckled, "so *that's* why you were crouched in the doorway while he was alone in the dining hall with another female? Do you make it a habit to lend your dates to other females often?"

"Look, you overgrown lizard, I frankly don't care what you think." She huffed, approaching me hastily. "What I do is none of your business, nor is it any of your business what my dates consist of. I'm not one of your little petulant soldiers to order around."

"Yet." I smirked

"What?" She asked, taken aback.

"You're not one of my soldiers *yet.*" I let the last word linger in the air, announcing it slowly.

“I’d sooner die than be anything other than a Brokenstone Soldier, let alone an overgrown lizard with wings. I think the better question here is what are *you* doing out here, hmm?” She said as she poked me in the chest.

I grabbed her wrist, my lips twisting into a wicked smile. “Well, my little wildfire, I was hoping to find some solace in a bit of fresh air, imagine my shock when I found you blocking the path to the courtyard.”

She yanked her wrist from my grasp in defiance and picked up the skirt of her dress as she began to flee from the hall. “My name is Asena and I’m not your fucking little wildfire.”

I chuckled softly to myself as I approached the round door that led to the courtyard, stopping before it to try to steal one last look at her but she’d vanished. Sighing, I pushed open the door and stepped into the courtyard. I groaned with pleasure as my wings shot out from my body and I pushed off the ground hard, launching myself into the night sky above.

The sensation of the wind on my wings as I twisted through the air felt absolutely euphoric. I hadn’t expected her to be so defiant, her small body held so much fire and I was absolutely dying to see her light the world ablaze with it. Our conversation in the hall left me yearning for more of her, and I knew that I would be cursing fate if wings did not sprout from her back and horns from her head igniting the fire that lay deep inside her soul.

# CHAPTER



## 19

*Asena*

A chill ran down my body as I reentered the ballroom and I found myself longing for the heat that Ryker had wrapped me in moments ago. I still couldn't believe what a complete asshole he'd been, what gave him the right to think I was *his*? I needed to find Kyllan and steer clear of Ryker, Crystal save me if I ran into him alone again tonight.

I spotted Kyllan near the windows that overlooked the courtyard, his back was to me and I couldn't make out who he was speaking to as I could only see curved ashen antlers stuck up in the air beyond his head. As I approached he stepped to the side and I caught sight of Sephira practically throwing herself at him.

*Give me a fucking break.*

Rage boiled beneath the surface of my skin as I watched her run a hand up his chest. I quickened my pace when Lord Castian stepped in my path, stopping me in my tracks.

"Seems as though someone has her sights set on something that doesn't belong to her," he purred, his eyes roaming over my body.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about." I scoffed, placing my hands on my hips.

He chuckled as he reached a frost gloved hand out and ran it down my arm, "Sweet girl, do you honestly believe anyone in this room hasn't seen you panting after that half-breed all night?" A smile played at the corner of his mouth as he cast a glance over his

shoulder at Kyllan. “Though, I can’t blame your eyes for wandering when your date seems to be otherwise occupied. Care for a glimpse behind the ice covered curtain, Asena?”

I stared at his outstretched hand as he bowed in my presence, well I *did* need to find out what he knew about mother. One dance couldn’t hurt, right? I placed my hand in his and he whisked me to the dancefloor, not bothering to wait for me to return his bow with a curtsy. He guided me around the dancefloor, showing me off like I was his most prized possession as song after song was played by the orchestra.

“You dance quite well, are they still teaching the proper dances at your academy?” He asked, a hint of surprise to his tone.

“They are, we were required to take one class the first two years we attended Greenbriar. Bit pointless honestly, if you ask me.” I replied.

“How do you figure?” He inquired, as we continued to move in perfect tandem.

“They should be teaching us how to properly defend ourselves so that when we Awaken we are better prepared for training and battling with our new powers.” I stated matter of factly.

“I think you may have a point there.” He chuckled.

He spun me out and back in again before dipping me low and holding me there. As his face grew closer to mine I noticed the way the shadows seemed to dance in his golden eyes as a smile formed on his lips.

“Get. Off. Of. Her.” A deep voice snarled.

I whipped my head to the side to see fire dancing across fingertips and my back stiffened, *this asshole again*. Castian let out a low chuckle and snapped me upright before spinning me so he stood between me and Ryker. He gave me a reassuring look before turning his attention back to Ryker.

“Now why would I go and do that? I already made sure the vote would go your way, why would I do something else that you wanted? Hmmm *half-breed?*” Venom poured from Castian as he spoke.

A soft moan escaped me as heat wrapped around me once more before Ryker spoke. “How dare you? I’m trying to protect those like her.” He took a step and yanked Castian off the floor by the lapels of

his suit coat. “Do not forget your place in all of this. Now keep your frostbite away from my little wildfire.”

*Pretentious ass.*

How dare he? I don't belong to anyone, much less some male with an ego the size of the kingdom.

“She doesn't belong to you, fire breather. Have *you* forgotten yourself? She's a vilande, she belongs to no-one but herself.” Castian paused to smile, glaring down at Rykers wrists as he wrapped his hands around them. “For now.”

Rage danced across Rykers eyes as ice coated his hands. “You're lucky I don't burn that suit from your body.”

All I could do was look on in horror as the rest of the room seemed to freeze in place, the music stopped and I could hear the sound of heavy footsteps coming towards us. A light touch from a calloused hand was placed on my back and I spun around to see Kyllan's kind face before me.

He leaned down and whispered in my ear, “Let's get you away from these prying eyes before your father kills both of these idiots.”

I cast a glance over my shoulder as Ryker dropped Castian on the ground and melted the ice surrounding his hands that were now curled in fists. Wasting no time, I grabbed Kyllan's hand and hurried away from the pair of alpha males, not stopping until we'd broken through the door of the courtyard and I could finally catch my breath.

“You want to explain why you've been avoiding me all night while you've been drooling over another male?” He asked angrily.

*Is he serious right now?*

“Yea sure,” I scoffed. “Right after you explain why you were slinking off with that blue eyed bitch.”

His eyebrows shot to his forehead and he stood there flabbergasted fumbling for words. I shook my head and stormed away from him before spinning back around to face him. For someone that wanted to brave fate together he sure did have a funny way of showing it. What if Sephira had other intentions, would he have gone with her then?

“You know what, actually don't bother. I followed you two, how does she know about the trials? Or better yet, were you going to tell me that she knew?”

He let out a sigh and said, "Ase you know I would have told you. I was actually planning on doing so tonight once we got back to our bunker. I'm not sure how she knows, I asked but she wouldn't tell me. Which means her father wasn't the one to let her in on that little secret."

"So someone else from inside the High Council is slipping information out?" I was taken aback, who would be leaking confidential information?

"It would seem so." He frowned. "As much as I hate to say this, I think we should tell your father once we get back to his office."

"No." I shook my head. "Unfortunately, he needs to know now."

I turned and looked through the set of windows to my right where father was currently smiling a little too politely at Ryker and Castian. *Fuck*. I really didn't want to deal with that right now. As much as I wanted to put it off I just needed the Awakening to be over and done with already. I wanted my antlers, maybe then that bloody dragon would quit referring to me as his.

"Ase, I'm not mad about what happened between Ryker and Castian. While I'm not *quite* sure why they were arguing over you, it doesn't upset me. I *am* aggravated that you seem to be so inclined to give your attention to a male who hasn't been the least bit pleasant to anyone you care about. Honestly the guy kind of seems like a sleazeball." He admitted, anger laced through his tone.

Hurt hung in his eyes as he looked at me and I instantly felt two inches tall. I closed the gap between us and wrapped my arms around him as he pulled me into his embrace.

"I'm sorry, Kyllan. I'm. I'm not quite sure what it is about him that makes me so curious, but he just seems so familiar. Like I've seen him before," I said softly.

"That doesn't make any sense, Ase. You've never met the bastard before tonight." Jealousy bit at the edges of his words.

"I know, but it feels like I have." I sighed with a frown as he released me and placed a kiss atop my head.

"Time to face the music, my love," he said.

"Please don't remind me, let's get this over with," I sighed.

Arm in arm we headed back inside to find Father. It seemed my reckoning was coming sooner rather than later.



# CHAPTER



# 20

## *Asena*

As we reentered the ballroom, I could feel the tension boiling beneath the surface of the seemingly calm atmosphere. Glancing around I spotted father with Castian and Ryker in the same place I'd fled from moments ago. I took a deep breath, Kyllan squeezed my hand in reassurance, and smiled as I cast a sidelong glance at him. It was moments like this that reminded me that I was lucky to have him, he was always there when I needed a little encouragement.

We approached the trio with caution, father's back was to me and I could feel the anger boiling beneath the surface as the sound of his too hushed tone reached my ears.

"I trust the pair of you will stay away from Asena now," he said, mustering all of his authority into his lowered voice.

Crystal have mercy, my cheeks flushed with embarrassment and I began retreating. Perhaps it was better to come back later. Kyllan flashed me a knowing glance and lightly tugged my hand, ushering me forward, to keep going.

"As you wish, Commander Montalli. I never meant to offend yourself or the Elven." Castian's smile slid into place as he spoke.

*Pfft*, I rolled my eyes. He may not have meant to offend us but he'd definitely meant to piss off Ryker. The animosity between those

two had been *intense*, like Ryker was looking for a reason to start a fight with Castian. I knew that the Mystarians and the Vekrothians hatred for one another ran deeper than those of the other realms, but this felt personal. Something told me there was more to that story than I knew.

Ryker's jaw ticked as he swallowed down his pride for the sake of the kingdom. "Of course sir. My sincerest apologies," he said, flashing father a smile. I could feel heat radiating off of him.

I tapped father's shoulder with my left hand, the cuff signifying my vow to Kyllan glinting in the light. Kyllan released my hand and slid his arm around my waist, tugging me towards him, possessively. *She is mine*, that gesture seemed to say.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, father, but could I have a word?" I said.

"Asena, I'm in the middle of something here. You'll have to wait." His tone was laced with anger and disappointment.

I looked between the three of them, father wore a mask of politeness though I could tell frustration hid beneath it. Castian's gaze caught mine and his lips curved upward into a smile, which I returned. Ryker's irritation seemed to grow as he looked from me to Castian and back again. His eyes roamed over me, seeming to snag on my cuff and his irritation was replaced by a confused frown.

Choosing to ignore his reaction I looked at Kyllan for help, hoping he'd speak up as it wasn't he who father was angry with. But he remained silent. Instead of speaking up he released his grip on my waist and rubbed my arm reassuringly, the top of his cuff poking out from the end of his suit jacket. He nodded in encouragement, this really couldn't wait. At the risk of facing his full wrath I pressed the issue.

I turned back to face father and didn't miss the flames dancing in Ryker's eyes as his stare bore into the cuff on Kyllan's wrist. I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat and took a deep breath.

"I'm afraid it can't wait, this information is time sensitive." My voice came out shaky, despite the smile of false confidence I wore.

Father turned back to me, surveying my pleading expression, his lips formed a thin line. "Very well." He turned his attention back to Castian and Ryker who were still looking a bit like someone stole their favorite toy. "If you'll excuse me gentlemen."

I followed Father as he moved toward the hallway, taking a left instead of a right, heading away from the dining hall. We continued down the corridor until reaching a large circular door that was adorned with a golden stag. Father pushed it open and ushered us inside. I glanced around in disbelief, this room was an exact replica of the office he had in the bunker.

The large oak desk sat in the center while bookshelves lined the walls on either side of the room. Stone bricks coated the back wall, though I saw no sign of a secret passageway here as I grazed my hand over the cool surface of the rock.

“Are you aware how close those two were to coming to blows over you, Asena? If I so much as see you look at either of them for the remainder of the night...” He trailed off.

“All I did was *dance* with Castian. I thought it best to try to get to know the high courts from the other realms since I may end up in one of them. Clearly that logic was flawed. If the other realms’ high court members are anything like the two of them, consider me less than interested,” I countered.

I looked at Kyllan to see him beaming with confidence. Good. Hopefully his frustrations with me were at least somewhat lessened now that I could actually speak my mind without the fear of prying ears.

Father sighed. “I suppose their behavior is not your fault. Those two have been at odds longer than you’ve been alive sweet girl, you can thank Elias for that. I encourage you to get to know the other high lords and ladies, maybe steer clear of the wolfkins, though. Lord Rohan is one shady son of a bitch.”

So there *was* more to that feud than just hatred between the realms.

“That’s actually what we need to tell you sir,” Kyllan said quietly.

Father cast a look between the two of us. “What about him?”

I bit my lip nervously. “We think he, or potentially someone else, told Sephira about the trials.”

Father ran a hand down his face in frustration and opened his mouth to speak only to be cut off by Kyllan.

“She found me in the ballroom and told me she had information for me but that she couldn’t share it there. We slipped back into the dining room unnoticed, well by everyone except Ase,” he said,

throwing me a pointed look before continuing, “and she told me that her father was planning to send us to face the nine trials before we awaken. I tried to get her to tell me how she knew, but she wouldn’t say.”

“Is this true?” He turned to look at me.

I shook my head. “Yes, and in the spirit of honesty, I wasn’t alone in the hall.” I looked between the two of them nervously. I’m sure this confession wouldn’t earn me any favors with either of them. “Ryker was there as well. He claimed to have been headed toward the courtyard, but I was crouched in the doorway that led out to it so Kyllan and Sephira wouldn’t see me. I can’t be certain, but I don’t think he heard anything, just the two of you exiting the dining hall together.”

“What did he say to you? Be specific, Asena,” Father demanded.

I cast a glance at Kyllan before letting my gaze drop to the floor. “He wanted to know if I made it a habit of letting my dates sneak off with other females. I promptly told him what I did or didn’t do wasn’t any of his business, then he made some offhand comment about me eventually becoming a Dragonian.”

Father scoffed at that. “As if you’d be anything other than an Elven.”

“I told him I’d sooner die than be anything but a Brokenstone soldier, much less an overgrown lizard,” I added.

A booming laugh filled the tiny room and I brought my gaze up from the floor. I was met with nothing but jealousy and rage as Kyllan’s cold stare bore straight through me. *Shit*. I’d hurt him, again. Father stifled his laugh sensing the tension forming between Kyllan and I.

“Eh, so I’d say it’s safe to assume that he didn’t overhear the conversation between you and Sephira then,” Father asked awkwardly.

Kyllan didn’t even bother to glance at father as he spoke. “No sir, I think his attention was safely elsewhere.” His throat bobbed, as if he were trying to swallow the bitter pill of jealousy and resentment that was blooming within him.

“I’m not sure what motivation Lord Rohan would have to tell Sephira, she’s already been through her awakening,” Father wondered aloud, stroking his beard, his face contorted in bewilderment. “Asena, would you mind sending Lady Selene here?”

Kyllan, I'd like you to stay for a bit. Lady Selene needs to hear exactly what Sephira told you."

"Of course father. I'll just go fetch her." I said and headed toward the door.

"No need for you to return dear, go have fun with your mother and the high ladies." Father cast me a reassuring smile.

My smile faded as I cast my glance downward once again. "Oh, okay. I'll just send Lady Selene this way then." I paused before leaving the room, casting a glance at Kyllan who refused to acknowledge that I was still here. "I'll see you back out there, Ky."

He simply grunted in response and I quickly made my exit as my emotions threatened to get the best of me. I gathered the skirt of my dress in my hands, lifting it slightly so I could move at a quicker pace, not wanting to be caught in this hall by surprise again. A sigh of relief escaped me as I reentered the ballroom and spotted Lady Selene in the seating area with mother.

"Asena, there you are! Where'd you run off to?" Mother spoke, her cheeks flushed from the sweet wine she'd been drinking.

"That's why I'm here actually..." I took a seat on the chaise next to her and turned toward the High Lady. "Lady Selene, my father needs to speak with you about an urgent matter. He and Kyllan are waiting for you in his office here."

"I see. It seems a High Lady's work is never complete, hmm? Elora dear, I have quite enjoyed your company, if you'll excuse me." Lady Selene said before scurrying off through the doorway I'd just appeared through.

I watched as she retreated from the room before turning my attention back to mother who was glancing about, taking in the merriment that filled the space. Finally she returned her gaze back to me, her smile dropping slightly before she spoke.

"Enjoying yourself this evening? I haven't seen you dancing with Kyllan too much, you two do make quite the lovely pair." Her eyes were slightly misty, most likely as a result of the wine and the exhilaration of such an extravagant event.

I frowned. "Unfortunately we haven't had much time. Between dealing with some business for the Awakening and silly fights over my stupidity, I'm afraid we won't have much time left. The hour is growing quite late."

“Silly fights? Not over that Ryker I hope. You won’t have to see him too much after this evening, I’m sure Kyllan knows that.” My mother made a gesturing motion with her hand, as if to shoo away the thought of the Dragonian Commander.

“You’d think so, but he’s acting like the whole world is ending when I haven’t even touched the guy. In fact I’ve kind of been going out of my way to avoid him because he intimidates me a little. Hopefully we can clear the air when we get back to our bunker, I doubt he’ll let me try to discuss it before then.” My words came out clipped, and I could feel a pit of anger brewing within me, like a fire being stoked by wind.

“As upsetting as that may be Asena, it probably *is* for the best. Remember my little wolf, it is always best to discuss matters of the heart behind closed doors. No one needs to listen in on conversations that concern your feelings for Kyllan *except* Kyllan.” She said, stroking a hand through the portion of my hair that lay loose at my back.

She was right. Her words calmed the storm brewing within me. I needed to make the best out of the situation until I could be alone with Kyllan tonight in the bunker. I opened my mouth to thank her for the advice but was rendered speechless by the sight of Lady Selene appearing in the doorway. Kyllan and father quickly moved past her and found us in the seating area before taking their places beside us. I took Kyllan’s hand in mine and he didn’t immediately jerk it away, that was progress I supposed.

“My lords and ladies I am afraid the hour has gotten away from me this night. It is time for me to bid you all farewell, I shall see you back here tomorrow morning to continue our Summer Solstice Celebrations,” The High Lady spoke to the room.

With a final regal wave to the room, she retreated down the corridor from which she came. That was the cue for the dinner party to end, and we, along with the other guests, made our way back to the entrance of the castle and out into the night, going our separate ways until morning.

# CHAPTER



# 21

*Ryker*

Leave it to me to want what I can't have. Why hadn't I noticed the stupid fucking cuff earlier? I paced back and forth in the room Selene had been kind enough to offer for the evening. A double bed sat against the wall, draped in plush green bedding that matched the curtains, currently billowing in the wind near the open balcony door. The flight I'd taken after the party this evening had done nothing to clear my mind of *her*. I needed a way to shake *her* from my mind. She was vowed to another. No matter how deep my desire for her ran, if she was happy with another male I would leave her be. My happiness isn't worth her misery.

The bed groaned in protest as I fell back onto it with a sigh. A glance at the clock standing against the wall beside the door told me I needed to at least attempt to get some rest before the meeting tomorrow. I stood and stripped out of the button down I'd worn to dinner then kicked off my suit pants and socks before returning to bed. I laid there with a hand behind my head and the other draped across my chest and stared at the ceiling, eventually drifting off to sleep.

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“Thank you all for returning so we can finalize these discussions,” Lady Selene said from the head of the table, her ethereal ballgown from the evening before replaced with much more practical garb.

I found myself back in the same dining hall we’d been served dinner in the night before. This time the seat across from me was occupied by none other than Lord Rohan himself. I made a mental note to keep track of his body language and expressions throughout our discussion today.

“Let us start with the vote, shall we?” She continued, wasting no time. I couldn’t help but smirk as Rohan shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “We will vote by show of hands. All those in favor of my proposal to have the trials active as the vilande exit the cave please raise your right hand.”

Hands raised around the table. I counted eight hands in total, which meant two were missing. Before I could deduce who hadn’t raised their hand Rohan spoke from across the table. “All those opposed to the proposal please stand.”

He rose to his feet along with nine others, a chuckle accompanied a chill in the air as I saw Castian standing.

“How dare you betray me?” I growled.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about, it seems you’re just as delusional as always, Ryker.” He said slyly, picking the dirt beneath his nails as he spoke.

Fury coursed through my veins as my power threatened to break through the barrier I held it behind.

“How did he betray you Ryker?” Roarke asked, my attention snapping to him.

“Ryker was campaigning for support in favor of the vote last night, after dinner. He actually swayed myself and my commander in favor of it. Though I am surprised to see that Lord Castian voted against it, as he wasn’t yesterday evening,” Draya spoke, a hint of curiosity in her tone.

“Well color me surprised! I wasn’t aware you’d taken such a strong stance in favor of our plight,” Lady Raeghan said colorfully.

A snarl ripped through the room just as Lord Rohan slammed a fist on the table. “None of this mindless dribble matters. The vote is



done, Lady Selene, your proposal has been denied by the council. Let's get on with the rest of this meeting so I can return to my wife."

"Very well. With The Awakening just one week away we need to get the trials in place sooner rather than later. I would suggest putting the most difficult trials at the end and the easiest at the front," Selene said solemnly, defeat in her tone.

"I would agree. I would also suggest that a few of the trials challenge the vilande mentally as opposed to just physically," Castian purred smugly.

Father placed a steady hand on my shoulder, sensing my displeasure towards the icy bastard. Glancing around the table the other members of the council all nodded their heads in approval.

"If we are all in agreement then we can get the order decided." Lady Selene paused, giving any naysayers a moment to speak up before continuing. "Right. So who would like to go first? Commander Montalli and I would like to place our trial at the tunnels. Elias, I know you spoke previously of creating a wall of fire the vilande would have to navigate through, is that still the case?" She turned to look at father.

"It is, therefore I think our trial should be placed near the end," father commented beside me.

"Agreed Elias, we wouldn't want any half wits burned alive would we?" Lord Theoden chuckled. "We are fine to go first if the High Council agrees."

"Well I think that's a fine start, therefore it would only make sense that water follows air," Lady Draya stated matter of factly.

Around and around the conversation went, until the final order was decided. It was determined that Fire would be the second to last trial, just before Gravity. Which meant that either father or I, maybe both of us even, would have to fly out to that bloody cave in Rastia early this week. We'd await word from Lord Titus that Utthaven's trial was firmly in place before we placed ours. Once the wall of fire was up, I'd enchant it so that only those of strong will and sound mind could make it through unscathed. I didn't feel too bad for those that were singed, though, I knew for fact the cave's waters were enchanted with healing properties. Seeing as our wall was followed by the lake at the bottom of the staircase, those that were injured would be soon healed after. Once our trial was in place, Father would fly south to Syrinx Castle in Alynthi and inform Lady Reyna.

With the meeting concluded there was no reason to stick around. I thanked Lady Selene for her hospitality and exited Antheia Palace with my father by my side.

“Well that was about as fun as being trapped in a block of ice,” I quipped, breathing freely and letting my wings spread.

He chuckled. “I appreciate you not ripping Castian’s head from his shoulders. He may be a pain in the ass but he is still a High Lord.”

“No need to remind me. I’d have put an end to his idle threats by now if he wasn’t. We need to make haste back home, the legion was restless when I left. I’m sure they’ve driven Knox, Kallus and Kiira mad by now,” I laughed nervously.

“Knox and Kallus hail from old Dragonian blood, they will stand resilient son. I’m sure of this.” He commented, stretching his wings as we walked down the cobblestone path towards the front gates.

“Even from the darkness?” I questioned. “Elijah was from one of the original families, even he fell prey to it. If only we knew where this shit was coming from.” I ran a hand through my hair.

Father brought me in for a quick hug. “Go on and head back, I’ll wrap up here. And son, be safe.”

“Aren’t I always?” I joked and he cast me a knowing glance. “Fine. I promise, just this once.”

My wings thrust out as I broke into a run, flapping as I leapt into the air and took flight. I soared around the castle and headed northeast to Soleia. As much trouble as they caused I couldn’t deny that I was anxious to get back to my legion. I needed to be brought up to speed on what occurred since I’d departed and I needed to debrief Kiira, Knox and Kallus on what the council had decided.

As my second, I’m sure Kiira wouldn’t be pleased to know she was right and I’d have to ground Knox and Kallus so they wouldn’t burn Zariya to the ground as retribution for Castian’s deceit. Those two have been itching to lay siege to Caligo Palace for centuries, by the Crystal it would be easy. I’d still like to meet the genius that chose to make that palace from ice.

It wasn’t long before I was flying over Nethilor in Loritholien, ensuring that I flew wide of Ellesmere Castle and the Light Fae that were sure to be out training today. Sure enough I spotted a set of white wings in my peripheral and flapped my wings harder, going above the clouds and speeding up. While we weren’t at odds with

the Light Fae, I'd had enough of playing courtier for the next milenia. I kept going until I spotted the Stygian Woods that lie between Elberien and Loritholien and banked east letting myself sail lower as I passed over the treetops. Swooping low, I spun letting the tips of my wings glide through the waters of Lake Nebulous as I tipped my head back, soaking the rays of sunlight in.

I didn't get moments like this often, ones where I didn't have to play the part of the fierce Commander or strong heir. The weight of it all became so heavy at times and I just wanted to bury my head in the sand to escape it. The peak of Antares smiled at me as I opened my eyes, I spun back over and rose higher in the air excited to greet my old friend. I'd trained at its base for the past hundred and twenty-five years. As I grew closer to the Crimson Legion's training grounds I felt a familiar presence just before I spotted a set of familiar scarlett wings. Kiira enjoyed trying to catch me off guard, but as I was fifty years her elder, my senses were greater than she gave me credit for.

"It's good to have you back Ryker," she said as I landed. "Did you enjoy playing dress up with all those fancy imbeciles?" Kiira was small and roguish, with hair she dyed crimson to match her wings.

Her eyes were such a dark shade of brown, they almost appeared black. But she had a smile that lit her up like a roaring fire, and when she smiled, you could almost see flames dancing in her dark eyes. I let out a hearty laugh. By the Crystal, it felt good to be home.

"It was definitely *interesting*. Castian was a prick as you predicted, but I did get an unexpected surprise," I said as we landed atop Antares' peak.

She wiggled her eyebrows and elbowed me knowingly, grinning at me sheepishly. "A *female* surprise?"

I sighed more dramatically than I had intended. "I met the red haired female from my night visions."

Her eyes went wide before throwing her arms around me. I pulled back and gave her a solemn smile.

"What is it?" she asked, regarding me with eyes that knew me all too well.

"It's not so much of a *what* as it is a *who*." I sighed. "She's Commander Roarke's daughter and happens to be vowed to another."

Her face dropped, as she turned to cast fire to gain entrance to the training grounds. We turned to walk in as greetings of welcome rang through my pointed ears.

“I’m sorry Ryker, I was sure that finding her would mean that you’d found your mate. I know it’s unheard of these days but I was hopeful for you. If anyone deserved to find the other half of their soul it’s you.” Kiira’s knowing eyes gazed up, searching my face.

I gave her a halfhearted smile as we continued through the grounds to my quarters where I could hear Kallus and Knox arguing over a game of poker. I shook my head in disbelief. It seemed not even my absence could keep those two from trying to take the other’s gold leaf.

“We’d better get in there before they break something, again.” I rolled my eyes.

I burst through the door just in time to see Knox lunge at Kallus across the table as they both looked up at me with mischievous grins on their faces. They looked at each other and burst out laughing before scrambling upright and rushing towards me. The wind was knocked out of me as their bodies collided with mine and a small yelp came from Kiira beside me as she narrowly escaped their tackle. The pair of them were large and strongly built, with thick muscles in their arms and legs and unruly hair only made wilder by the wind around the Antares.

“Welcome home, brother!” Knox said in a deep voice.

“Yea, yea. I missed you guys too, now get the fuck off of me.” I laughed, tussling with the pair while Kiira laughed heartily.

# CHAPTER



## 22

### *Asena*

It was late when we returned to our bunker last night and Kyllan froze me out the entire way back. I ambled out of bed and padded across the small dwelling, flipping a light on in the kitchen as I rubbed sleep from my eyes. Frowning, I cast a glance at Kyllan's closed door. It seemed that he was going to continue giving me the cold shoulder, I could only hope he was speaking to me again by the time we left for my birthday dinner tonight. I pulled the coffee down from the cabinet and filled the press with enough for two cups before filling it with hot water and pressing it. Quietly, I plucked two cups from the shelf and filled them before carrying them to the table.

Raising my fist tentatively, I knocked on Kyllan's door and waited patiently for him to answer. I was only met with silence from the other side of the solid wooden door, I knocked again.

"Kyllan?" I said, resting my forehead against the door.

A thud sounded on the other side of the door.

"Kyllan, I know you're mad at me but please talk to me. There's never been an issue we haven't been able to work out. I promise I'll make this up to you," I pleaded.

I stumbled forward as he yanked the door open.

"Exactly how do you plan on doing that Asena?" He questioned, clearly still annoyed with me as I suspected.

“Well I thought I’d start by making you coffee, and finishing your schoolwork.” I motioned to the table where I’d sat his coffee and had our assignments stacked on my side, then flashed him what I’d hoped was my most winning smile.

He glanced over, smiling slightly before walking over and taking his seat. Bringing his cup up to his mouth, he closed his eyes and drank deeply before he spoke again.

“I’m listening.” He said, gently setting his coffee cup on the table before him.

I mused to myself that I could still win him over with a smile, and began what was sure to be an awkward conversation.. “So last night...”

“Yeah?” He said, arching an eyebrow in my direction.

“I don’t know what came over me with Ryker, and I know saying this probably isn’t going to help my case, but I want to be honest with you.” I took a deep breath and continued. “There’s a weird sense of familiarity with him.”

“So you said, Ase, this shit doesn’t make any sense,” he said, taking another sip of his coffee.

“We live in a world full of magik and uncertainty, Ky. A lot doesn’t make sense.” I bit my lip nervously. “It felt like I was being pulled toward him. Like there was a string I couldn’t see wrapped around the two of us, tying us together.”

Kyllan’s jaw ticked as his stare bore into me. I hated the pain I saw in his eyes as his eyes searched my face. I knew this was the opposite of what he wanted to hear but I wasn’t going to hide anything from him. If this *thing* between us was truly going to work, there was no room for secrets.

“Professor Castor described that feeling when she told us about fated mates, Asena. So I guess that makes this pointless then.” His words were clipped and accusatory as he motioned a finger between the two of us.

He stood and started pacing back and forth as I got out our Astrology book, searching for the chapter on fated mates. *Aha!* Just what I was looking for.

*“Fated Mates are couples that are compelled by fate, biology, and attraction. The couple will find themselves thrown together in unique situations and tested by fate, if each individual does what is*

*necessary, the mating bond will snap into place. If not, the bond will be broken.*’ Kyllan, he can’t be my mate if what the book says is true,” I stated matter of factly, casting a glance in his direction.

He looked at me incredulously. “If anything, that just confirms it, Ase. How do you explain that phantom pull towards him?” He ran his hands through his hair in frustration, before dragging them down his face and gripping the back of the chair.

“I can’t,” I said as I got to my feet and rounded the table.

“What do you mean you can’t? If you can’t explain it then what are we doing here, Ase?” He sighed, turning towards me and placing his hands on my shoulders.

“Fighting.” I brought my hands up to place them on his wrists as he drew me in closer.

“Well that’s obvious.” He laughed incredulously.

“Don’t be an ass, Ky. I meant fighting for this, for us. I don’t want some overgrown reptile. I want *you*.” I turned my face up to look at him.

“Why?” He asked, trying to hide the hurt in his eyes.

“Because, try as I might, Kyllan, I’m done hiding how I feel for you. I’ve known you my *entire* life, you’ve always been there for me and I can’t imagine my life without you in it, fate be damned!” I said, closing the gap between us.

Kyllan placed his hand on my cheek, sweeping away the tears that began falling. “I hate seeing you upset, my love. I’m sorry for acting this way, I’ve just wanted this, wanted you, for so long. Now that I have it, I’m terrified to lose you. Can you forgive me for being an ass?”

I pressed my body to his as I grasped the back of his head, bringing his lips crashing down into mine. His hands became tangled in my hair as he deepened the kiss, his tongue begging for entrance at my lips. I opened my mouth slightly, welcoming the warm sensation of his tongue exploring my mouth, warring with my own. I knew neither of us had much experience with kissing, but I could definitely see what all the fuss was about. The hem of my shirt rode up, grazing my ass as I hooked my arms over his shoulder, running a hand through his golden locks.

His hands dropped to my waist tentatively and he pulled back for a moment, looking at me with nervous and unyielding hunger in his

eyes. I ran a shaky hand down his bare chest, exploring the dips and plateaus of his muscular form. My nerves were showing and yet he seemed completely calm despite the fact that both of us were on the verge of venturing into completely uncharted territory. Biting my lip, I played with the waistband of his sage green sweats looking up at him with hooded eyes.

“I think I’m ready, Kyllan,” I whispered in a breathy voice, heart beating quickly in my chest.

“Are you sure?” He asked, and I nodded in response.

“I want my first time to be with you, someone I know and trust to stop if it becomes too much,” I admitted.

I felt his fingertips gently graze my hips as he played with the hem of my shirt, searching my eyes for any hint of hesitation. In hopes of giving him a bit of encouragement, I brought my lips up to his, kissing him again, our teeth knocking slightly from our inexperience. Despite the awkwardness, a deep groan escaped him before he yanked my shirt over my head and tossed it across the room. His lips returned to mine once again as he cupped my breasts, exploring them, running the pad of his thumbs over their peaks causing my nipples to pebble against the sensation.

He trailed clumsy kisses down my neck, nibbling my collarbone as he began his descent. A gasp escaped me as he took my breast in his mouth, flicking his tongue across my nipple, his eyes looking up at me for reassurance that he was doing it right. Warmth pooled between my legs as the feeling of pleasure built, the desire for him to put me out of my misery and give me release growing stronger with each passing moment. He turned his attention to my other breast, his hand traveling down the plains of my stomach and skimmed hesitantly under my waistband panties, pausing there.

“Please,” I begged, gasping at the closeness of his hand to my most intimate parts.

His fingers slid beneath the fabric and he gasped at my wetness, releasing my breast from his sweet torture. He withdrew his hand and slid my panties down my legs, leaving a trail of kisses as he went.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” His voice was laced with need, his breath hot against my skin.

He swiped at my wetness once more, teasing my clit with soft gentle strokes before he plunged a finger deep inside me. It was as if



some primal instinct within him took over, guiding his actions. I moaned with pain and pleasure at the sudden intrusion. Emboldened by my cries, he slowly began picking up the pace. I clutched at his shoulders, grabbing his hair in my hands, doing anything I could to assure him what he was doing was right. He responded by adding another finger and hastily pumping them in and out of me, picking up the pace as my breaths grew more rigid. The pain was gone as he brought me to the edge of satisfaction before withdrawing his fingers, leaving me aching at the emptiness.

Stepping back he hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his pants and shoved them to the floor. My eyes widened with shock and wanting as I took in the length of his cock as it sprang free. Cupping my ass, he hoisted me up and I wrapped my legs around his waist, bringing my lips to his once more. Carefully, he carried me over to the small kitchen and sat me down on the counter, the coolness sending a shiver up my spine.

He lined himself up at my entrance and paused, looking at me for any sign of hesitancy before he continued. I kissed him once more and scooted closer to him, letting him know I still wanted this, I wanted him. He took a shaky breath and slowly pushed himself inside me. My mind exploded at the painfully euphoric sensation and I threw my head back as a whimper escaped me. He began moving his hips, withdrawing slowly before slamming into me again. Over and over and over. My nails raked down his back, demanding more. He took my breast in his mouth again as his hand returned to my clit, his thrusts becoming quicker, messier. His cock began to stiffen inside me and he stilled for a moment before withdrawing himself and dropping to his knees. Shoving his fingers back inside me he expelled a shaky breath. The heat from his mouth causing me to tremble once more. His tongue swiped hesitantly between my lips as he pumped his fingers inside me, the euphoric feeling was almost too much.

“Come for me, Asena,” he demanded through gritted teeth.

His movements became sloppy as he drew more desperate, and my pussy clenched around his fingers as I came undone. He stood quickly and shoved his cock back inside me, thrusting in and out of me at a relentless pace. Unable to hold it in, I screamed his name as my body writhed with pleasure before him. With one final thrust he let out a low growl as he spilled himself inside me. He kissed me sweetly before resting his forehead against mine.

“Happy Birthday, Ase,” he said breathlessly.

I smiled coyly at him, nuzzling my nose against his before pushing him back and sliding off the counter. He grasped my hips holding me in place before he brought his lips down to meet mine once more. The weight of what we'd just done became heavy as he pulled back and frowned, his stare on my now swollen lips. Brushing a finger over them lightly before placing a soft kiss at their edge and releasing his grasp on me.

The floor creaked slightly as I walked over to retrieve my shirt from the living room floor where he'd tossed it earlier. I pulled it over my head and walked into my room to clean up and replace the panties that were Crystal knows where at this point. When I returned to the kitchen I was met with a shirtless Kyllan preparing fresh coffee.

"So, does this mean I get out of doing your schoolwork too?" I laughed nervously, nodding to the coffee press as I leaned across the counter.

"Oh, I'd say you're more than forgiven, my love." He smiled at me, washing away any fear that what we'd done would change things between us. "Go sit, I'll bring yours over."

I walked over to the table and took my seat, glancing down at the Astrology book in front of me. My plan had been to start on Mythical Beasts as we didn't have too much work left to complete that course, but since my book was already flipped open I decided to change course. Kyllan sat a cup of coffee down on the table in front of me and took his place across from me.

"So are you ready for tonight?" He asked, pulling out his Astrology book and flipping it open to page 297.

"Of course!" I exclaimed. "I've been waiting for this birthday for a long time. Partly because it's one step closer to independence, but it's also one step closer to becoming a Brokenstone. Even if my night visions have other ideas."

"How are those? I haven't heard you screaming in your sleep like you described the last one," he asked cautiously, as if he didn't want to break the sensual spell that had fallen over our morning.

"They've been considerably less since we solidified the vow, I haven't had one at all since coming here." The words came out, and I felt relieved to admit truthfully that the night visions had seemed to have ceased.

“See, what did I tell you, Ase? Nothing to worry about. Honestly it was probably the stress of hearing about The Awakening day in and day out at Greenbriar that brought them on.” He smiled winningly at me, his still boyish charm on full display with that magnificent smile.

I gave him a halfhearted smile. “Yeah. You’re probably right. Now let’s finish this workload so we can concentrate on training the rest of the week. Remember, we leave in four days for graduation,” I said, looking to change the subject away from my dreams.

“Ughhh, do we really have to go to that?” Kyllan groaned.

A laugh burst from my chest. “Do you really think either of our mother’s would let us live if we skipped it?”

He stuck his tongue out at me before turning his focus to the book in front of him. I watched him for a moment in quiet contemplation. Our relationship had just been irrevocably changed for better or for worse by giving into our desire for each other. I didn’t spend too much time worrying, I knew that Ky and I were meant to be. I’d known it for as long as I could remember, and it was only fitting that we were each other’s first.

# CHAPTER



## 23

### *Asena*

“Finally!” Kyllan exclaimed as we shut our Herbology books, marking our classwork complete ahead of schedule.

We’d worked diligently all day, only breaking for lunch and it had paid off. I glanced at the clock on the wall and scrambled to my feet. *Shower, I needed to shower now if we were going to avoid being late for dinner* I thought, frantically. I darted to the bathroom, turning the water on so it would warm before retreating to my room to grab a towel.

“We’re gonna be late!” I said in a panicked tone. “Be ready to get in after me and don’t even think about joining me in there, we don’t have time,” I scolded as I saw the idea bubbling up within him.

He laughed as I closed the door, locking it behind me. I’d stepped below the steady stream of hot water when I heard the doorknob turn.

“Ase!” Kyllan’s grumpy voice sounded through the door and I chuckled to myself.

“Go get ready, loverboy. There will be time to play *after* we get back,” I called, feigning indignation in my voice.

His footsteps retreated as I grabbed the shampoo bottle, doling out a small amount before lathering it into my hair. The hot water hugged the ache in my muscles as it ran down my body, giving me a moment of sweet relief from the constant tension they held. I rinsed

the shampoo from my hair before quickly washing myself and shut the water off. Coolness met me as I stepped out from the heat of the shower. I dried off hastily and wrapped my hair in the towel before I emerged from the bathroom.

“All yours,” I said at Kyllan as I walked by him, stark naked and into my bedroom.

His eyes raked over my form as he licked his lips, nervously. My hand clasped around the door, swinging it shut as he made a beeline for me.

“Tease!” He called through the door, thumping a fist against the wood, and chuckling giddily.

I cracked the door and poked my head out, “Just reminding you of what I’ll be wearing to bed tonight. Now go shower, you smell like sex and coffee.”

“Fiiiine.” He groaned.

Giggling, I retreated back into my room, closing the door and securing the latch firmly in place. I walked over to the bureau and plucked the simple black dress from it, laying it out on the bed before slipping a pair of black silk panties on. Tipping my head forward, I pulled my hair from the towel it had been wrapped in, scrunching it up to give it a wavy texture. I stepped into the black dress, slipping my arms through the straps and pulling it up onto my shoulders. The velvet hugged my figure flaring slightly at my hips and draping around my feet. A slit was cut into the skirt, running up to my upper thigh making it easier to move around in the snug fabric. I reached behind me and zipped the dress, the low cut back making it so I needn’t ask for help. My feet slid into the black heels I’d purchased to match the dress and I wrenched the door open stepping into the living room, happy to see the door to the bath open.

After fussing with my hair for a few minutes I sighed, apparently today was going to be a frizzy hair day. I ran my fingertips under the water and brushed them through my hair, begging it to cooperate. Smiling, I reached for my make up bag and quickly swiped charcoal across my eyelids and stained my lips pale pink, opting to not go too over the top with my usual shade of red in this dress.

A whistle sounded behind me and I whirled around to see Kyllan standing before me in an all black suit. He looked absolutely delectable yet somehow out of place in the dark color, the contrast stark against his usual sunny disposition.

“You look lovely, Asena.” He beamed. “Shall we?”

I took his extended arm and he led me from our bunker to father’s office. He rapped on the closed door when we arrived.

“It’s open!” Mother’s voice called from within.

Kyllan cracked the door open and we were met with the sight of Mother fussing over father’s bowtie.

“Don’t you two just look wonderful,” she exclaimed, clasping her hands together.

Father closed the distance between us, bringing me into a bear hug.

“Happy birthday, sweet girl. How are you feeling about today?” He asked, stepping back, holding me in place to get a good look at me.

I beamed at him, secretly hoping he couldn’t tell what Kyllan and I had just done. “I’m okay. I’m happy, and it seems the night visions are nowhere to be found since confirming our vow.” I cast a glance at Kyllan who smiled at me.

“Oh that’s wonderful news! Let us celebrate this night, for our girl is no longer haunted by her troubles.” He said, practically beaming with joy. “We have prepared to travel to a restaurant in town but I think we can break the rules for today, what do you say, Elora?”

“Just for tonight,” she replied, indulgently.

“Alright kids hold on tight to us,” Father commanded, taking my hand in his as mother took Kyllan’s in hers.

I stumbled as I suddenly found myself standing in front of The Golden Elk. Confused, I looked at father and began to ask what happened but he answered that question before I could get it out.

“You’ve both just dispelled for the first time. Technically we aren’t supposed to dispel those who aren’t our relatives, but Kyllan is as close to family as it comes. The Mother knows I’ll get to call him son soon enough, eh?” He raised an eyebrow in Kyllan’s direction causing him to go into a coughing fit from embarrassment.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing at both mine and Kyllan’s embarrassment. It really was cute how worked up he got whenever father even so much as hinted at our future, but now after the intimacy we’d shared just a few hours prior, his discomfort was pronounced. Mother shook her head and headed towards the

door, causing father to sprint ahead of her and hold the door open for us.

We stepped inside and I was rendered speechless at the beauty held within. Slate walls curved around the circular interior of the lobby, golden sconces dotting them along the way. Hanging wisteria arched above the doorway that led into the main seating area, which held rows and rows of oak and stone tables with plush moss covered benches and chairs surrounding them. The slate walls were carved with markings similar to the columns lining the main thoroughfare through town. My hand ran across the cool stone as the hostess approached us.

“Commander! It’s a pleasure to see you here. Right this way, I’ll show you to the best seat in the house,” she said sweetly, her tall golden antlers glinting in the low light.

She led us through the labyrinth of tables to a large stone table topped with a flat metal grill. Our chairs lined the front and sides while the back remained empty. *How odd.*

“Malachi will be right with you,” she exclaimed before flitting off across the room.

“Asena, Kyllan,” Father said, looking in our direction. “Get whatever you like, price is no matter. Tonight we celebrate our beautiful girl’s birth and we rejoice in her overcoming her fears.” He smiled proudly as he spoke those last words.

A slender male approached wearing a crisp white shirt under a deep green vest and a matching pair of smart pants.

“Evening Commander,” the male said before turning to mother, “Elora, so nice to see you again.”

Mother grinned from ear to ear, “Malachi, it is a pleasure as always.”

“Now who might this stunning young couple be?” He asked curiously.

“This is our daughter, Asena, and her friend, Kyllan,” Father replied with a smile, motioning to each of us. “They are both set to Awaken at the week’s end, Elora and I are quite excited to see our girl emerge from that cave with her antlers.”

I blushed as father spoke of our Awakening, radiating with pride. He and mother put more pressure on me than they often realized. The fear of not emerging from the cave as an elf but something

different was a thought that had haunted me for years. Maybe there was some truth to Kyllan's theory about stress being the culprit behind my night visions.

"Asena dear, it's your day, why don't you order first?" Mother suggested.

"Her day? Are we celebrating?" Malachi asked.

Kyllan smiled, "Today is Asena's twenty-fifth birthday. Commander Montalli brought us here to celebrate."

A mischievous smile played at Malachi's lips. "Well then, I'll make sure the chef knows. Now, what can I get you, dear?"

"I'll have the steak with roast vegetables please." I smiled, as my stomach growled at the thought of the hearty meal to come.

"Excellent choice, dear." Malachi replied smoothly.

He proceeded to take everyone's order then retreated back to the kitchens to prepare our beverages. Mother and father began whispering amongst themselves before nodding solemnly and turning to me.

"Asena, there is a serious matter we need to discuss, though your mother and I don't want either of you to dwell on this." Father sighed before lowering his voice, leaning over the table towards us. "As you both know, Lady Selene made a proposal to the High Council that the trials only appear once each vilande was Awakened. The council voted *against* her proposal."

Kyllan furrowed his brow as he looked from father to me and back again. "What does this mean for us?"

"This week, Bria will be training you not only physically but mentally as well. There are a few spelled sections around the barracks that you will have to navigate through, but I believe you will both be as prepared as possible when we leave in four days time." He explained.

"It was Ryker wasn't it? He's the one who changed sides!" I burst out, slightly too loud, a white hot anger searing through me at the thought.

A few of the other patrons turned to look at us before returning their focus to their meals. My father made a quieting gesture with his hands.

"Actually, it was Lord Castian, though we never counted on his vote, it was surprising to see him turncoat so quickly," Father



admitted. “Now, that is all I want to hear on the subject for the rest of the night. Ah, here comes our chef now.”

I felt chided like a small child, shut down. I knew that there would be no more discussion about the topic at this table. My attention was drawn to a squeaking sound coming toward us. I cast a confused look at him as a short female approached, her thin antlers short and curved back. Malachi appeared behind her, wheeling a cart of uncooked meats and vegetables. My confusion heightened as I watched her pull cooking utensils out and lean down to fiddle with something under the table. *What is she doing?*

Suddenly I felt heat rise from the table and my curiosity peaked. The small female stood upright and confirmed our orders before spreading some sort of cooking oil overtop of the metal surface. Father turned to watch me as the chef struck a match and lit the oil on fire. My eyebrows raced up my forehead in surprise and I was awestruck.

“That was amazing!” I blurted out, excitedly. Thoughts of Ryker were long gone for the moment.

Father let out a hearty chuckle. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself, dear.”

“Roarke, this must be your pride and joy you’ve spoken so much about,” the female said, placing the meat on the grill.

“Right you are Cleo!” Father exclaimed proudly, his smile warm and wide on his handsome face.

Cleo finished cooking our meal as we chatted amongst ourselves. She reached down and shut the grill off then wheeled her cart away from the table back to the kitchen. I speared a piece of steak with my fork and took a bite, the flavor from the garlic and herb butter exploding against my taste buds. My eyes closed as I savored each bite, an audible *mmmmmm* escaped me as I swallowed.

Kyllan leaned close, his lips brushing against my earlobe. “I bet I can get you to make that face again later, with much less clothing on,” he whispered sheepishly before pulling away smiling and returning his attention to his meal.

My thighs clenched together with anticipation of his promise, heat pooling in my core. I pushed the thought from my mind and focused instead on the gift that was placed before me. Excitement flooded me and I tore the packaging open as my parents looked on with anxious stares. The now ripped packaging revealed a small

wooden box, curious about its contents, I opened it. Music flooded the room around us and I realized it was *Incandescence*, the song Kyllan and I first danced to. My lips curved upward into a smile at the memory as I opened the box the rest of the way. Inside lie a bit of leather cord that had been fashioned into a bracelet, and there in the center was a golden stag. The charm was identical to the pin that adorned father's chest while in uniform.

"We just want you to know how proud we are, Asena. You've accomplished so much and soon you'll be graduating the top of your class at Greenbriar. You can't imagine how happy to have such a wonderful daughter," Mother said, sniffing with emotion.

I stared at the bracelet, astonished by its beauty and the weight of expectation that came with the delicate piece of jewelry. I could feel the pressure mounting higher and higher to grip the crystal and emerge an elf. I was beginning to feel like anything but would be seen as unacceptable. Kyllan placed a steadying hand on my back and I leaned into it, letting him ground me in my now anxious state.

"It's beautiful, Father will you clasp it for me?" I asked eagerly, holding out my wrist and the bracelet.

# CHAPTER



## 24

### *Asena*

“Yes! You feel so fucking good, Ase!” Kyllan cried as he gripped my hips and thrust into me.

His fingers rubbed my clit as his thrusts became more frantic with need. My pussy clenched tight around his cock and I came undone, crying out in ecstasy. He groaned with pleasure following me over the edge a moment later, collapsing on the bed next to me. This time had been smoother than the first, the pleasure unspeakable.

“I don’t think I could ever tire of you,” he said, turning to face me while still lying on his back.

I smiled at his confession as I snuggled up to him, resting my head on his chest. He ran his hand lazily down my back, the feeling euphoric as he grazed the skin between my shoulderblades. It wasn’t long before we both drifted off to sleep.

*“Wait here, I’ll be right back. I just need to fetch something for you from my quarters,” he said, his blue eyes full of hope and happiness.*

*He turned and walked off toward the circular cabin at the center of the grounds, just off the edge of the training ring. His wings were on display as I watched him disappear beyond the door to his quarters. I hopped up from where I sat on the small stone wall and began practicing my stances.*

*Footsteps sounded behind me and I whirled around expecting to see him only to be met with two hooded figures. NO! It couldn't be, this isn't happening. Darkness descended upon me and terror shot through me straight to my core. Fear threatened to immobilize me as I began to run. Get to him, he can save you. I thought to myself.*

*A high pitched laugh sounded beside me as the more slender of the two figures latched onto me, dragging me away from the arena. I broke free from their grasp and ran, smacking into a wall of nothingness. Turning I ran again and again and again, all to no avail.*

*"I'm going to get my retribution, and you, little wolf, are the key," the taller figure spoke as they began to pull back their hood.*

"ASENA!" Kyllan shouted in a panic stricken voice.

I looked around confused, a cold sweat coating my skin. Fear hung in the room and I turned to Kyllan, his face void of all color. The sweet happy expression wiped from his face, replaced by terror.

"You were screaming." He frowned. "I thought you were getting better."

"So did I," I responded meekly. "Though this one was different from the others. I wasn't in Herbexia."

"That doesn't make sense, you've always been here in your night visions. Why would it change? Where were you?" He shook his head, his eyebrows knitting together with worry.

I chewed on my lip, hesitant to respond. "I can't be sure but I think I was in Vekroth. I almost saw the face of one of them, they started to remove their hood just before you woke me."

"Was the voice the same? Did you recognize it?" He questioned me urgently.

"Yes, and I don't think so. Can we just go back to bed? I'm still rather tired, what time is it anyway?" I asked, tiredly.

"Late," he replied, sinking back into bed capturing me in his arms. "I promise I'll never let anything happen to you as long as I'm around."

"I'll hold you to that," I responded, leaning up to kiss him, letting myself sink into the warm safety of his embrace.



The next four days flew by, with our schoolwork out of the way we were able to focus solely on our training. As promised, Bria worked with us in the enchanted parts of the barracks. Training us as much as she could against a few of the other elements.

It was our last day in Verena before returning home and I intended to make the most of it. I dragged Kyllan into town and we milled about the shops. Our first stop was the tanner, my new training gear was finally ready for pick up. I'd opted for a more modern set with dark brown leather and patches of emerald green sewn throughout it. The fit was absolutely divine when I'd slipped into it, the leather was buttery soft against my skin, and supple enough to move with me through all of the training movements we'd been learning the past weeks. I thanked the tanner and we were on our way.

The flowers and vines of ivy that were strewn throughout the square had been replaced by small fire pits with stone elk rising above them. Though the columns remained, they no longer held carvings but vines of wisteria instead. The malachite crystals still adorned the tops of each one, glinting under the brilliant sunlight.

I dragged Kyllan into the stationary shop, I was in desperate need of more enchanted parchment. A sinking feeling in my gut told me I'd be needing to write quite a few letters in the future.

"Ase, we should probably head back, I imagine Roarke will want to leave soon. And *someone* still needs to finish packing," Kyllan said, playfully swatting my nose with his index finger.

I let out an exasperated sigh. "I suppose you're right. Let's go"

We traipsed through town back to the barracks arriving at the moss covered tree and placed a hand upon it, revealing the door underneath. I began the descent that would lead us into the barracks below. Once we reached the final door I cast a glance back at Kyllan and pushed through it.

The sound of The Brokenstone training began to fade as we turned down the hall that led us to our bunker. Kyllan pushed open our door and carried our bags to my room, setting them down beside my trunk.

"I can't believe it's almost here. Today we return home, tomorrow we graduate, then in two days time we will be standing before the cave," I said, placing my new items atop my belongings already

tucked away in my trunk. I could feel a tug of anxiety behind my navel, pulling it's way up my chest, and leaving a lump in my throat.

Kyllan shook his head in disbelief. "I feel like we just got here, now here we are heading home to face fate. It does seem a bit daunting now that it's actually happening."

A soft knock sounded at the door and Kyllan and I exchanged a confused look.

"I'll get it, you finish up here. We've got to meet your father soon." He said, rising to his feet and going to answer the door.

"Oh, Ky Ky, I just couldn't let you leave without saying goodbye."

*What the fuck was she doing here?!*

I slammed the lid of my trunk closed and stalked from the room. "Ky Ky would have been fine without your goodbye, Sephira. Besides, it's not like we won't be back." I scoffed.

Her eyes bore daggers into me as I walked over and placed a hand in Kyllan's. "Why are you with her, Ky Ky? I thought we had something special?" She said, taking a step towards him, doing nothing to hide the wounded look in her eyes.

He let go of my hand, raising both of his and taking a step back. "Woah Sephira. I'm with Ase. I think you should go."

"Ugh!" She scowled, stomping off down the hall.

I swung the door closed behind her, thankful to be leaving her behind. Even if it was only for a few days. Another knock sounded at the door and I groaned, ripping it open ready to lay into her.

"You kids ready?" Father said.

"Yes please, get me out of here." I replied, standing aside so he could enter.

He stepped into the small space and glanced around. "You're all packed yea? I'll have Heidi send your things home once we dispel."

"Yep I packed last night, Ase on the other hand just wrapped up." He teased.

I stuck my tongue out at him in response.

"Hold on tight you two." Father said, taking our hands.

The room around us disappeared from sight and we landed in the kitchen of Kyllan's home.

“Oh my sweet boy, it’s so wonderful to see you!” Corvina exclaimed, rushing over to scoop Kyllan in her arms. “Allerick come quick, they’re back!”

“What’s all this now?” Allerick called, his footsteps echoing in the hall. He rounded the corner and appeared in the doorway. “Well now, aren’t you two a sight for sore eyes.”

“I’m afraid we can’t stay long, I just wanted to ensure young Kyllan here made it back safely.” Father explained.

“Of course. Thank you so much for looking after him these past few weeks Roarke,” Allerick said, clasping father on the shoulder.

Father nodded in response. I turned and hugged Kyllan goodbye, placing a swift kiss on his cheek.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, yea?” I asked.

“Bright and early, my love,” He replied, swooping in for a swift kiss.

I stepped back and took hold of father’s hand once more. The familiar view of the Vernize home fading as our own home appeared before me. Mother peaked her head out of the door, ushering us inside.

# CHAPTER



# 25

## *Asena*

*His hazel eyes bore into mine and he commanded, “AGAIN!”*

*With outstretched hands I created a wall of ice. I smiled proudly at my creation only to have it knocked down by his swift kick a moment later.*

*“It’s a start. You’ll have to do better, build it sturdier to truly protect against an attack. I have something that might help.” He laughed.*

*He turned and stalked off towards a small building to the left of the training grounds, his golden locks billowing in the wind. I watched as he disappeared behind the closed door. Shrugging I focused on building walls of ice and trying to knock them down. I must have built twenty of them before I grew bored waiting for him to return.*

*I began walking towards the door he’d gone into moments ago when a winged shadow appeared on the ground before me. My heart beat frantically as I turned and was met with two hooded figures, wings protruding from the back of their cloaks. Running away was futile, the larger of the two figures swooped down and held a hand over my mouth as the other cast shadows around us, hiding our location.*

*I bit down on the rough hand that was clasped over my lips and let out a scream for help. The figure cackled maniacally.*



*“Scream all you want little wolf, no one will hear you,” a rough voice said.*

*I watched in horror as the blonde male who’d been training me searched frantically for me. Calling my name and crashing to his knees when I didn’t respond.*

*“You’re finally mine. I always knew I’d have you.”*

*The figure pulled his hood back and I gasped as Ryker stared back at me.*

I bolted upright in bed, glancing around, I began to calm myself. Home, I was home. I tossed the covers aside and padded over to the small window across the room. The sun was starting to crest over the hills on the horizon. This may be one of the last times I get to take in this view.

My mind drifted back to the vision that haunted my dreams. I wasn’t sure what to make of them, until the Summer Solstice dinner they’d always been consistently the same. Maybe these variations were my mind trying to discern who truly had my best interest at heart and who wanted to do me harm. I could only hope these visions subsided once my fate was more certain.

A faint knock sounded at the door before it creaked open. The fragrant scent of honeysuckle and mint wafted toward me as mother grew closer.

“Good morning sweet girl. I thought we could take a walk before you have to get ready,” she mused.

I smiled. “That sounds lovely.”

“I’ll wait for you downstairs then,” she said, bringing me in for a brief hug before departing from the room.

I dressed in a simple black top and green pants, slipped my boots on and bolted down the stairs. My hair hung loose around my shoulders in waves from the braid I’d fallen asleep in.

“Ready?” Mother asked.

“After you,” I replied, holding the door open for her.

I followed her through the door, pulling it closed behind us. We walked for a while in comfortable silence and were almost to the meadow where I often came to read. She veered off the road straight toward it and I smiled following after her. With an outstretched hand she created life as she walked. Assorted colors of violets and daisies sprouted from the ground in bunches spread throughout the meadow.

She stopped in the center, glancing around at the beauty she'd added before speaking. "Do you remember the first day I brought you here?"

"It had rained the day before and you were so mad that I wouldn't stay out of the mud so you covered it with moss and flowers. Now it's one of my favorite places to read when I venture from the cottage," I replied with a smile, feeling the tug of nostalgia in my chest.

"I created this meadow when we lost your brother. My grief was so great that I felt like I would explode if I didn't let something out," she said, crouching down and sitting on the plush grass, patting the spot next to her. "I know we don't often speak of him, but with your Awakening in two days time your father and I felt it was best to tell you what happened."

My eyes widened in surprise and I moved to sit next to her.

"As you know, it was about this time of year that we lost him. He was just one year away from graduating Greenbriar when it happened. Your father had taken him out hunting many times and Zander wanted to go by himself. After much deliberation we decided to let him. The hour grew quite late and he hadn't returned home." She paused to wipe away the tears that began to fall.

"You don't have to tell me, I know this is hard for you to think about," I offered, rubbing my hand in soothing circles on her back.

"No Asena, I'm afraid you need to know." Taking a few calming breaths, she continued. "Your father and I went out in search of him. We made it as far as this clearing before we found him. He had large frost ridden claw marks across his chest and was bleeding badly, but he wasn't gone, not yet. Your father bent down to pick him up and that's when he was gone."

"What do you mean gone?" I asked

She looked around to make sure we were still alone. "Your brother was taken from us by shadow magic, a dark force we still can't explain. We searched for him for years before we finally gave up hope. When Lady Selene learned of what happened she insisted that your father take up the Commander position with The Brokenstone so he would have reason to travel to the other realms. She hoped he'd find him. When he'd searched every inch of the kingdom, Selene gifted us the cottage we have now. It wasn't too long after we moved in that the Vernize's came to visit, introducing themselves and welcoming us to town. As you know, their

friendship meant more to us at that time than anyone will ever know. To lose a child is akin to losing one's purpose, I pray that you never have to experience such a thing my sweet girl."

I threw my arms around her as she fell apart, still grieving at the loss of Zander. We sat that way for a while and I let her take solace in my presence, in the fact that I was still here.

She pulled back from me, wiping away her tears and placing a false smile upon her face. "We should head home, I imagine you'll want to change before heading to the academy."



"Welcome students, parents, and professors. Today marks the end of an important chapter in your lives. But it also marks the beginning of your greatest adventure. In two days time you will begin the journey to discover your fate. Though you may end up in different places I want you all to remember the bonds you made while in these walls. Don't lose sight of the friendships you made here simply because the distance is too great." Headmaster Cyrus bellowed from the podium. "Without further ado, I present to you, your graduating class! Students when I call your name please walk forward and receive your diplomas before returning to your seats."

Processional music began playing softly and the first row of students stood, one by one as their names were called they walked across the stage and received their diplomas. I cast a glance over my shoulder and found Kyllan's gaze was on me. His mouth widened into a grin as my eyes met his and I turned back around, shaking my head. Excitement buzzed through my veins when the row in front of me stood, it was almost my turn. Once the last student made her return our row got to their feet, and I was practically bouncing in place.

"Asena Montalli"

I walked forward and up onto the stage, stopping to grab my diploma and returned to my seat. Row by row students received their diplomas until there was only one row left.

"Kyllan Vernize"

I watched as Kyllan strode across the stage, his smile so wide it took up his entire face. He returned to his seat as Headmaster Cyrus

spoke again.

“It is my pleasure to present to you your graduating class! Students you may move your tassels to your left side.”

A roar of excitement tore through the auditorium. Parents cheered as we celebrated, tossing our caps into the air. The processional music started up again and we exited the auditorium with our families following closely behind us. I immediately ran towards Kyllan and he wrapped me up in his arms, spinning me around before placing me back on the ground. His lips met mine and he tightened his grip on me.

“We did it, my love,” he said, resting his forehead against mine.

“We did, now let’s go celebrate,” I replied.

# CHAPTER



## 26

*Ryker*

“Sir, your father just received word from Lord Theoden. The final trial is in place,” Eirian said, saluting me.

For a cadet she showed a lot of promise. Perhaps it was due to the fact that she finally felt she had a place to call home, somewhere she knew she was cared for. When she’d first arrived here a year ago her stature was slim, her arms and legs scrawny with barely any muscle on them. I’d seen the desire to prove herself behind that hard exterior of indifference she put on everyday at training. I rode her harder than the other cadets because I knew she could take it. My persistence paid off, the female that stood before me now was one of my top cadets, defined muscles ran along her once thin arms.

“Thank you, Eirian,” I replied.

She strode off to take her place on the far right side of the front line. Her ashen hair hung loose, falling at her chin.

I paced back and forth along the front line, preparing to give some sort of speech to this particular unit of cadets. With the Awakening tomorrow, I’d decided to hold off on promoting anyone until I could assess how many new recruits would be joining The Crimson Legion. While this was the largest number of vilande we’d seen participating in the ceremony, I wasn’t quite sure how many would be making it to the Crystal. The ranks had to remain separate to keep order and balance amongst the legion, even if that meant postponing rank promotions.

“Cadets!” I began and they immediately stood at attention. “As you are all aware, the Awakening ceremony is to be held tomorrow. While today is the day in which rank promotions would normally be handed out, that will not be the case. This does not mean you are not all worthy of promotion, in fact it is quite the opposite. As your new Commander, I will be doing things differently than my predecessor. I must ensure that there are enough soldiers to fill each rank in The Crimson Legion. Once the new vilande transform into vakna and we learn how many Dragonians will be joining our ranks, I will revisit rank promotions.”

I turned to face the unit and was met with a mixed wave of emotions upon their faces. As I glanced from soldier to soldier I saw confusion, anger, hurt, understanding and on one loan face there was indifference. *Shit*. Her mask was firmly back in place, I ran a hand through my hair, frustrated with myself.

“Dismissed. Enjoy your day off. Eirian, remain behind please,” I ordered.

She crossed her arms defiantly, her green eyes bore into me. That mask of indifference was long gone.

“I don’t understand. I’m the best cadet you’ve got *sir*. Why punish me along with the others?”

“Watch your tone with me, Eirian. I may show you kindness but I am still your Commander,” I scolded her.

She turned and stretched her violet wings so they opened as wide as they would go. “I thought you were one of the good ones, Ryker. You were so kind to me and encouraged me to do better, to be better. Do you understand what false hope does to an orphan? It crushes our spirit. It’s why we don’t let hope in, our greatest fear is to be let down by those we look up to. I hope you enjoy your trip. Reprimand me if you want, I don’t much care what else you have to say right now.”

I stood there as she shot straight in the air, her wings flapping hard. My gaze followed her as she disappeared over the peak of Antares. I let out a sigh as I turned to see Kiira standing there. *Fuck’s sake, I really didn’t want a lecture right now*. She wasn’t fond of postponing the rank promotions and we’d decided to agree to disagree on the matter. Knox and Kallus were firmly behind me on this stance as was my father. With the Awakening altered this year we couldn’t leave anything to chance. It didn’t mean we wouldn’t

continue to advance the cadets training, it just meant they'd have to be patient before getting their recognition.

“So that went as well as trying to give a sutra a bath,” she chuckled.

I shuddered at the thought. The Sutra were a much smaller relative of the Rhapsorn. Though they lacked in size they made up for it in fight. A few of us tamed them to use as house cats to take care of the small rodent problem on the grounds. Their gift of sight came in handy from time to time as well since their visions would pass to whomever held the small beast. Legend says the original seers left them behind when they fled from Kinbrolds just before The Great War.

I scowled at her. “She’s the last one I’d have expected to act that way. I thought she’d understand, given that she’s had quite the inside view to the thoughts behind our madness.”

“Ryker, I know you could never understand what it is like for folks like her and I growing up. But for one second just try to imagine it. Constantly feeling like you don’t have a true place in the world, like you don’t matter to anyone, never feeling the love of a true parent. It’s one of the worst things a child can go through. I was lucky, I had a family take me in that loved me, but there was always a difference between me and their other children. Eirian wasn’t so lucky. She was moved from group home to group home to group home. You know, she told me a few months back that she looked at us like the older siblings she always wanted.” Kiira explained.

I walked over to her and linked my arm through hers as we began our descent to the living quarters.

“You’re right. I will never know what that is like not to know the love of a parent. I was fortunate in that regard, but I do know what it means to lose one. Though I don’t need to remind you of that. I still say I wouldn’t have made it through those years after her death without you, Knox and Kallus.” I said quietly as the lodging sector came into view. “I promise to try to be a bit more understanding, at least where Eirian is concerned. Though I can’t be caught showing favoritism, the units will have my head.”

“As long as you try that is all any of us can ask of you,” she said, flashing me a smile. “Now let’s go drink the night away since you’ve so graciously decided to let the legion out of training for the day.”

“Oh I have, have I?” I laughed, shaking my head.

“You did. Knox, Kallus and I already announced to our units this morning before you rounded up the cadets,” she taunted.

“How generous of me.” I laughed sarcastically. “Did I do anything else I should know about?”

“Nope. But it would be nice of you to join the legion for the Midsummer Celebration tonight,” she said hopefully.

I frowned at her. She knew where I stood on this, I wasn’t one of their equals anymore. “Kiira, we’ve been over this.”

“Oh I know. But if you’d pull the stick out of your ass for a minute you’d see no one here gives a shit about all that. The legion knows to follow you on and off the battlefield. Let them see the old you for a change. They should know their Commander isn’t always buttoned up and proper.” She flashed me a look that said I wouldn’t have much say in the matter, despite the fact that I was her superior.

“I’ll think about it,” I relented.

“Great, so I’ll be by your cabin to fetch you at sundown,” she called, sauntering off to her own cabin.

I shook my head. “I said I’d think about it, you relentless creature,” I called after her.

The sun would be setting in a few hours, leaving me free to go for a flight. I smiled as I spotted Knox and Kallus, it’d been some time since we raced. My spirit lightened as I walked towards them, perhaps a day with my brothers was exactly what I needed to get my mind off of tomorrow’s festivities.

“Knox. Kallus,” I said firmly.

They gave each other a look as if to say *oh shit*. No doubt they were behind the free time I found myself now having. I cast a glance to Knox, his short brown hair was disheveled atop his head, sweat gleaming off his forehead. My gaze drifted to Kallus, his silver hair fell to his shoulders and was shaved on the right side. Both with black ink crawling up their necks, identical to mine. I smiled at the memory, the three of us ventured into Soleia and added to the tattoo placed upon us by the Crystal. We elected to extend the flames surrounding the image of the Crystal, wrapping up and over our shoulder, flowing up our necks and down our collarbones.

“I take it I have you two to thank for today’s shenanigans?” I chuckled softly, unable to maintain my facade any longer.



“Ah it’s just a bit of fun. Besides, the units are ahead of schedule with their training anyhow,” Knox said, relief flooding his features.

“I’ll make you two a deal. Kiira wants me to come to the bonfire tonight with the rest of the legion. Beat me and I’ll do it.” I shrugged.

Kallus’s gaze darkened. “Beat you how?”

“In a race brother. How else?” I smirked, knowing damn well I was the fastest of our group.

Knox bounced with excitement, he was competitive by nature and lived for the rush our friendly competitions provided. Though he was currently mimicking a child the night before winter solstice.

“You’re on,” they both said in unison and shot into the air.

I let out a deep laugh before launching off the ground after them. The wind whipped around me as I tore through the air. Knox was just ahead of Kallus as they headed for the peak of Antares. I flapped my wings faster and passed Kallus. A growl ripped from his throat as I sailed past him, headed straight for Knox. I tackled my brother mid-air and sent the pair of us tumbling from the sky in a fit of laughter. At the last second I opened my wings and slowed my descent, gliding down gracefully to land atop the mountain.

“Ha! Finally one of us beat you,” Knox said, dancing victoriously.

“What in the Crystal’s name are you doing?” I laughed.

“Celebrating, what does it look like?” Knox asked, not bothering to stop his awkward movements.

“It looks like you’re having a fit,” Kallus said as he landed beside us. He cast a glance at me. “So I guess this means you’ll be joining us.”

“Oh I always was. Kiira wasn’t letting me off the hook for this one,” I replied with a smirk as I situated myself on the perch we’d fashioned here years ago.

He shook his head and crouched down to join me. “I should have known our sister would have something up her sleeve. She always does.”

“That she does, brother, that she does,” Knox said, joining us on our perch.

# CHAPTER



# 27

## *Asena*

I'd decided to take a moment to escape the bustle happening within the walls of our home today and spend some time with my koi. Sunlight gleamed off the surface of the water. They were truly mesmerizing to watch at times. Gazing at them swimming in delicate swirls around each other allowed me to gain a bit of peace amongst the madness. I tossed a handful of their feed out, disrupting the still water's surface and sat down in the crook of the willow next to the small pond. I laid back against its thick trunk and pulled out *All Is Fair*, the second book in the Fyorian series. I'd meant to start it while we were away but I never quite got around to it.

Annalise had just flung a flaccid carrot at Ruhn when I caught the sound of Kyllan's voice growing closer. A quick look at the sun's position told me I'd been sitting here for far too long. I hopped to my feet and ran inside, bolting up the stairs to my bedroom. There on the bed was my newest set of training leathers, soon I'd be purchasing more just like them. Suddenly I found myself thankful I'd thought to shower this morning before venturing outside, as I definitely wouldn't have time now. I tugged on the pants and top in record time before throwing my feet into the tall brown boots and lacing up the fronts.

"Asena!" Father's voice called from the base of the stairs.

*Perfect timing.* I'd just finished securing the laces on the last boot. I grabbed my burlap bag and bounded down the stairs.

“Well now, looks like someone’s ready to conquer their fate,” he said.

I gave him a quick smile. “As ever.”

“Roarke, they’re here!” Mother called just as I heard the door open.

We rounded the corner to see Allerick, Corvina and Kyllan step into our home. Mother smiled, bringing Corvina into a quick hug before moving on to do the same with Allerick.

“Roarke, all is well I hope?” Allerick’s husky voice rang out as he extended a hand out to father.

“Oh as well as they can be, old friend,” he replied, clasping his hand and bringing him in for a hug.

It was nice to see our parents like this. Happy. Maybe they would be okay if I didn’t awaken as an elf. I found myself quickly wrapped in Allerick and Corvina’s arms and I looked to Kyllan who was enduring a similar treatment from my parents.

“Are we ready? We’ll want to get a move on if we want to get a good view of the cave entrance,” Father said.

Everyone nodded in unison.

“Right, kids you’ve already dispelled once so you know what to expect. Remember it’s very important not to let go of our hands. We’ll be traveling much further this time, wouldn’t want you two getting lost along the way,” Father explained.

Father took my left hand and mother took my right, each of them planting a kiss on my hands before letting them drop. They nodded to Allerick and Corvina just before they faded from view. I closed my eyes against the darkness that surrounded me. Soon, I felt my feet hit solid ground again and popped my eyes open.

Purple lights illuminated everything surrounding us. The buildings here were unlike anything I’d seen back home. Tall structures protruded from the ground that were black in color with silver trim, each one alight with lanterns filled with purple electricity.

“This way folks, the ceremony will be starting soon,” Father said.

He set off down a black stone path to our left that led downhill. I bit my lip and cast Kyllan a worried look. He gave me a halfhearted smile and took my hand in his, giving it a squeeze before we followed the group downhill. My eyes doubled in size when the

large opening of the crystal cave came into view, a slight breeze seemed to be coming from within. *Well at least it won't be stuffy in there*, I thought to myself.

A rather large crowd had already begun to gather there. I glanced around at the other vilande that would be in the cave with Kyllan and I. There were a few familiar faces I recognized from Greenbriar, but there were even more that I didn't recognize.

"Asena, it is very important that you and Kyllan keep your wits about you inside the cave. The other vilande will be trying to sabotage you as you are the daughter of a commander," Father said before turning his attention directly to Kyllan. "I expect you to keep my daughter safe. Remember the vow you swore to each other, both of you."

"You don't have to be the first ones out of the cave, you just have to make it out." Allerick added.

Our parents gave us a quick squeeze before leaving us at the entrance and finding seats in the stands to the left side of the opening. My gaze turned to the opposite side of the entrance where a stage with a podium was set up. Rows and rows of balcony seating loomed above us. One by one, the seats began filling with the High Lords and Ladies from the various realms. A lump caught in my throat when I saw the Dragonians swoop in overhead, directly into the box that was decorated in red. Lady Selene appeared a moment later just below them in the green box, Lady Raeghan appeared next to her in the orange one. Once the High families were all present Lady Reyna dispelled from her box to the podium that sat on the stage.

"Citizens of Kinbrolds. It is my absolute honor and pleasure to welcome you all back to Alynthi for yet another Awakening Ceremony," Lady Reyna spoke with conviction in her voice. "This year marks the three hundredth anniversary of the original Awakening and is a very special and momentous occasion. It is my duty to this year's vilande to inform you that you will be tested both mentally and physically as you travel through the cave in search of the Crystal. Don't fret, if you can not pass the trial, use the flare that is being passed to you now to alert the Commanders that you wish to be retrieved from the cave."

I looked around and sure enough, Rastian soldiers moved throughout the group of vilande with a box of purple glowing objects. I reached in and grabbed one as the dark fae reached us.

Though I didn't plan on using it, better to have it and not need it than be stuck in the cave unable to make it through.

"Those that are removed from the cave prior to awakening their power will be unable to join any army. You will have the option to be sent to train as a healer or return to your home realm and work as a shop-keeper there. Before we continue, are there any that wish to receive this fate?" Lady Reyna asked.

I looked around in horror as over twenty hands shot in the air. How could they elect to not even try. *Maybe this was one of the trials.* I cast a glance over my shoulder to see father smiling proudly at me.

"Very well. Those with their hands up please step off the landing and move to the empty section of bleachers to my left," she said, gesturing to the set of bleachers that seemed to appear from thin air. "The rest of you. These trials are not meant for the faint of heart. You will have five days time to make it to the kyanite crystal and navigate back to this very spot. Those that succeed will be joining the army of their awakened species. Those that remain in the cave and do not receive their gift will be sent to train as healers. And lastly, those that receive their gifts but do not find the exit will be sent to live in their new realm. It will be at the discretion of the Commander of that realm's army as to if you have secured a spot amongst their ranks."

Cheers erupted from the stands around us. Well at least I knew that I just had to make it to the Crystal. I cast a glance back at father who gave me a reassuring nod. That was all the motivation I needed. I didn't have to exit, I just had to receive my gift and become elven to secure my place in The Brokenstone.

"So we just need to reach the Crystal. Father will give us a place in the army, I'm certain, of it," I whispered.

"We should still plan to make it out, just in case one of us doesn't awaken as an elf," he countered, his voice strained with nerves.

I frowned, knowing he was right but I couldn't bear to think about being separated from him. "Okay," I responded in a clipped tone.

"Do you remember how many trials there are in total?" Kyllan asked

"I'm sure she doesn't know since we haven't found out yet, mate. Now, if you two would kindly shut it so the rest of us can hear that'd be great," the male in front of us snapped over his shoulder.

*Asshole.*

“There will be eight trials in total. Be warned, a few of the realms have worked together. It is not certain that you will always face one power alone. Use your training from your respective academies,” Lady Reyna continued on.

Yeah, that’s all I needed to hear.

“Okay, so there are eight trials and we have five days. We should probably leave two days to make it back out, what do you think?” I asked Kyllan, chewing the side of my nail nervously.

“That sounds good. I wish we knew the order of the trials, but I’m just glad we got the heads up about them,” he replied, quietly.

“As do I. Let’s just plan on doing three trials per day,” I said, trying to keep my voice low. “If there’s nowhere to stop, we keep going until we find somewhere to rest that’s safe.”

“Agreed.” He nodded.

“Will you two shut up already?” The male snapped at us again, his tone a harsh hiss.

*What was this guy’s damage? We’ve already heard the important shit.*

I turned back to say something to Kyllan when Lady Reyna’s voice rang out around us, drawing my attention back to her.

“At the end of each day, my soldiers will be dispelling into the cave to bring each of the vilande food and water. We can’t very well let you lot starve in a cave with no wildlife to hunt.” Lady Reyna chuckled, shooting Lord Rohan a cocky grin.

Something told me he’d been against that idea. *What an entitled ass.* I sincerely wanted to know what kind of person harbored ill feelings toward vilande. We couldn’t even protect ourselves magikally, and it’s not like we were training for combat at our academies. He has some serious issues.

“Without further ado, let the three hundredth Awakening begin!” Lady Reyna shouted excitedly, shooting a spark of electricity thundering into the sky.

Kyllan stepped closer to me and grasped the side of my face. “In case we get torn apart after this is over. I need you to know I don’t regret it. You are everything I could ever want, and I will love you for the rest of this life as well as the next.”

I smiled as he brought his lips crashing down to mine. Heat spiraled through me as I wrapped my arms around him, pushing a hand into his hair. A loud roar echoed throughout the air and I pulled back from him suddenly. I cast a glance toward the balconies over the stands where our parents sat, and saw Ryker staring daggers into me.

“Let’s go conquer our fate,” Kyllan said, taking my hand in his once again and moving toward the opening of the cave.

# CHAPTER



## 28

### *Asena*

The wind picked up as we entered the cave, whipping around us in wild gusts. I looked around the cavern and took note of the vines that grew along the walls and ran down the center of the floor.

“So far so good,” Kyllan chirped.

“Ky, we’re ten whole steps inside.” I laughed.

“What? Can I not be the positive one for once?” He joked and I rolled my eyes.

We continued deeper into the cave when we heard a slew of curses coming from the cavern in front of us. Our footsteps slowed instantly. I cast a glance at Kyllan who was staring straight ahead, trying to widen his eyes to see what lay ahead.

“Let’s go, but be careful. Stay close to me,” he ordered.

I nodded in agreement and we began to move forward, the wind growing stronger as we went deeper into the cave. *That’s weird. You’d think the wind would be dying down with us in the cover of the cave.*

“Ahhhhh,” a voice called out.

We watched in horror as a vilande was thrown through the air back to the beginning of the cave. Kyllan and I exchanged a knowing look. *Air*. The first trial was air.

“Interesting first choice, but okay,” I joked.



“So I’m thinking the wind comes in gusts, yeah? We just need to get our timing right so we can run past the source,” he suggested with a shrug.

“Sounds like a plan. Let’s go watch the others so we can get the timing down,” I agreed.

He nodded and we hunkered down, creeping along the wall slowly until we were close enough to see the others trying to make it through the gusts. I watched vilande after vilande get thrown backwards and land a few feet behind us. It seemed they were getting blown back when they were almost past the large gust. *That must be where the magik is the strongest*, I thought to myself. A light fae would need to be there to cast the magik for it to be that powerful. If we could find them we could try and sneak past, there’d be no need to run. My eyes searched frantically to find the source of the wind, but I didn’t spot the first hint of the light fae that would be casting it. That’s when the realization struck me. Our plan wouldn’t work. *The magik was sensitive to vilande.*

“Kyllan,” I said, turning towards him.

“Did you figure out the timing? I can’t seem to get it down,” he said as his brow furrowed, his attention still focused forward.

I shook my head. “That’s because it isn’t timed. The gusts are coming once the magik placed here senses someone without it.”

“So, outrunning it won’t be an option then,” he said flatly.

“Unfortunately not,” I said, frowning.

*How were we supposed to get past this?* I looked around again, searching for any answer. Maybe we could grip the walls? They were slick but they weren’t flat, if we could get a good enough grip then maybe.

“Let’s try holding onto the walls, and moving slowly. If we aren’t running straight toward it, then it can’t propel us back as far,” I suggested.

Kyllan shrugged in acceptance and we crossed to the left wall where the cavern wasn’t as crowded. Coolness radiated from the wall as I reached out in an attempt to grasp hold of it. My hands kept slipping as the stone walls were slick with condensation. *Wait, that’s it!* I dropped to the ground and began searching in my burlap bag.

“Ase. What are you looking for?” He asked, confusion laced in his words.

“I know it’s in here somewhere. Aha!” I murmured aloud.

I grabbed the spool of burlap out of the bottom of the bag and wrapped it around the palms of my hands.

“Ase, you’re a genius,” Kyllan exclaimed. “This should definitely help!” He flashed a bright smile.

He took the spool and did the same. I smiled triumphantly as we gripped the stone wall firmly and our hand placement didn’t falter. Slowly, we began marching forward, being sure to keep our hands clasped to the rougher portions of the wall and our feet planted firmly on the ground.

“It’s working!” Kyllan shouted as the wind started picking up.

Yes. Almost there. Just. A. Little. Farther.

*Shit.*

My hand slipped and I was thrown backward, landing with a thud on the hard ground of the cave. A second later Kyllan was deposited right next to me.

“Well that almost worked,” he said breathlessly, propping himself up on his elbows next to me.

We’d been in this cave for only a few minutes and I already felt defeated. Though as I looked around it looked like most of the others were having the same problem. A few of us sat in defeat together quietly. After a while of seeing the others try and fail over and over and over, several of the vilande smashed their purple flares against the earth floor. Dark fae began to dispel in all over to remove those that chose to exit.

“I can’t believe they’re just giving up,” I said quietly. A pang of sadness rang through me for them and I frowned.

“Can you blame them? How are we supposed to get past this?” He asked, failure laced through his tone.

“No, but that doesn’t mean I’m ready to just give up because it’s hard. There’s a way through this. Remember what we were taught in the academy. All magik has a weakness,” I stated, matter of factly. “Besides, we don’t have to beat the wind. We just need to find a way through it.” I tried to find the bright side, he needed the encouragement. We both did.

He slipped his hand in mine, and gave my hand a slight squeeze along with a halfhearted smile. I looked around the cavern again when I spotted them. *Stupid. So stupid.* I’d thought to make a mental

note of them when we entered the cave but the air trial left me distracted. I can't believe I didn't think of this first.

"Kyllan. I know how to beat the first trial," I said confidently.

He gave me a bewildered look and I motioned to the vines that ran along the floor. Past where the wind started. His eyes lit with excitement.

"Let's do it. This one has to be a combination of earth and wind," he exclaimed.

We crouched down, lying on the ground, and grasped hold of the vines. We each gave our respective vine a nice hard tug to make sure it was secure and could support our weight without snapping. I smiled as mine held firm without hesitation. Turning my head to the right, I flashed an earnest smile at Kyllan and we climbed along the floor. Arm over arm, scooting on our knees as the wind beat against our faces. My grip threatened to slip a few times, but I remained vigilant, thankful for the bits of burlap that were still wrapped around my hands. We were almost there. I looked over at Kyllan again, he'd slowed his pace to make sure I made it through with him. The wind was so strong now my hair was blowing around wildly and I could barely see past the sea of red curls in front of me. Why hadn't I thought to slip it into a braid? One last push. I pulled myself along inch by inch.

With one last pull I felt my hair fall and the wind stopped. I looked beside me to see Kyllan jumping up triumphantly. He reached an arm down to me pulling me up into an embrace.

"You're bloody brilliant, do you know that?" He asked.

"I do now. And I won't ever let you forget it," I replied, smiling at him.

We returned our focus toward the cavern we'd just come from as the sound of the other vilande beginning to cheer erupted. A group of them had begun to crawl along the floor just as we had. There were so many left behind us, that must mean we are one of the ones first through. We returned our attention forward and trudged ahead.

A chill coated the air as we began walking downhill, toward the belly of the cave. Soon we were greeted with the sound of water and I stilled. Kyllan halted suddenly just ahead of me, he must have heard it too.

"Water must be next," he stated.

“And here I was hoping they’d spaced these trials a bit farther apart,” I said sardonically. “Well let’s get this one over with. If we’re going to get wet we should probably rest for the night after that. I don’t really want to trudge through a cave sopping wet once the temperature drops.”

“Probably a good idea. We will just have to make up the lost ground tomorrow,” he added.

I nodded in understanding and we continued around the bend in the cave coming upon a room that seemed to have no exit. There was a small illuminated pond to the right with a waterfall pouring into it. The light from within it pulsating slightly, as if the magik within had a heartbeat.

“That’s odd,” I said.

“What’s that?” Kyllan asked.

“I didn’t know waterfalls existed inside caves. Wonder where that’s coming from,” I said, nodding towards the top.

Kyllan shrugged. “Maybe it’s coming from outside the cave. We aren’t too deep in it yet. Either way it looks like this is the Earth or Shifter trial. We’ve gotta find a way out of here if we want to keep to the schedule.”

“Let’s check the walls for a concealed exit. We should be able to detect the foreign feel of the magik if we get close enough,” I said moving to the right side of the room.

I felt the slick wall with an outstretched hand until I got to the edge of the water, but found nothing. A glance at the disgruntled look on Kyllan’s face told me he’d come up empty as well.

“Maybe it’s behind the waterfall?” He suggested.

I scoffed. “Yea, I’ll let you search that one, I’m not getting wet unless I have to.”

He shook his head and took a look at the small pond. I watched as he hopped from stone to stone across the pond to the waterfall, disappearing behind it.

“Ase!” He called.

“Did you find it?” I asked, hope clinging to my every word.

He jumped out from behind the waterfall but he was completely dry. *How?*

“It’s exactly like the one from the Brokenstone training barracks. Though to pass through this one unscathed I imagine you have to want to awaken your power bad enough,” He enlightened me.

“I never thought I’d be so happy to see another one of these bloody waterfalls again.” I chuckled, my mood instantly lightening at the revelation.

He led the way back across the stones and we jumped through the waterfall. I looked down and unsurprisingly found us both still completely dry. I took his face in my hands and kissed him hastily before dragging him off deeper into the cave.

# CHAPTER



# 29

## *Asena*

Hours had passed since we'd crossed beneath the waterfall. My feet groaned in protest at each step I took and sweat streamed down my back beneath the thick leather of my top. I stopped for a moment, leaning into the coolness emanating from the sleek stone walls as I braced myself against them.

"Kyllan, I need to rest. Just a moment then we can push on," I said, trying to catch my breath.

He looked me over with a frown, noting my ragged breathing and shaky legs. My back slid against the wall as I dropped to the ground, relief flooding through my muscles instantly. The look on Kyllan's face told me I was due for a tongue lashing. I hadn't bothered to stretch this morning and his cocked eyebrow told me he knew it.

Instead he said nothing, squatting down to be eye level with me once more. His hands gripped my right leg and he began pressing and circling the muscles there. A small moan broke free of my throat. He moved his attention higher, giving my thigh the same treatment before moving to my left leg repeating the movement there. All the while, never moving his eyes from mine.

A few of the other vilande casted faintly curious glances at us as they passed. The competitiveness in me gave me enough energy to push to my feet. I set off down the path, leaving Kyllan to catch up. His hand wrapped around my elbow and pulled me back.

“It’s not a race, Asena. We just have to make it out,” he reminded me, pulling me to a halt. “Don’t overdo it on day one. We have four more days to get to the Crystal and get back out.”

I expelled a sigh of discontent. “I know, but you know how I am, Ky. I just don’t want to be last.”

“Do you really think that we’ll be last? Ase, listen. Really listen.” He paused and I strained my ears, trying to hear whatever it was he was wanting me to listen to. “Close your eyes and concentrate on the way we came. You’ll hear them.”

Doing as he commanded, I shut my eyes and blocked out the sound of our breathing. A smile stretched across my face as I heard the sound of footsteps and voices coming from the corridor behind us.

“See, Ase. We won’t be last. There are hundreds of vilande participating, I’d bet half of them don’t even make it out of this bloody cave,” he stated matter of factly.

“Thank you, Ky.” I raised up onto my tiptoes and gave him a quick kiss. “Now let’s go find this next trial and kick it’s ass.”

He slid his fingers between mine, grasping my hand as he smiled down at me. We set off again down the corridor hand in hand. As we walked I looked over at him stealing glances here and there. I aimlessly reached up and rubbed the malachite wolf that hung at my neck, praying to the Mother that Kyllan and I wouldn’t be separated when The Awakening was complete. I truly couldn’t imagine my life without him in it.

Kyllan stopped suddenly and I drew my gaze forward as the cavern before us split into two paths. We shared a look of confusion before turning our gaze back to the split.

I scratched my head. “Our teachers didn’t mention anything about the cavern splitting. Just that there would be the three tunnels.”

He dropped my hand and walked forward, peering down each of the paths before us. “They look identical. I wonder if it matters which one we go down?”

“Only one way to find out. I say we split up and each take a tunnel, whichever dead ends we can just turn and come back here,” I suggested.

“Absolutely not. Let’s go down the left one together, if it dead ends we come back here and go to the right,” he insisted.

We stepped into the tunnel to the left and it split in two again. I turned to look behind us and saw the room we just came from. Kyllan dropped my hand and took a step back.

“Ase,” He said, his tone laced with disbelief. “You’ve gotta see this!”

I turned and exited the tunnel. “What is it?!” I asked excitedly

He pointed at the wall next to the tunnel. My gaze followed his arm to a blank wall. That wasn’t right. Where was the other tunnel? His eyes widened in realization.

“It’s the shifter trial. If we choose correctly the other tunnel goes away,” he observed.

“So what happens if we choose wrong?” I asked grimly.

We both glanced back at the tunnel. “Let’s hope we don’t find out,” he replied.

I nodded and we re-entered the tunnel. This time I stepped forward to inspect the tunnels. Again they were identical. Logically, if the left was the correct tunnel last time surely the right would be correct this time.

“Let’s go right,” I said, confidence coursing through me.

Kyllan nodded and followed me as we entered the right tunnel. The room around us began to shrink and fade away, replaced by the original room we’d entered. I scowled at the tunnels facing us. *Shifters*. I thought with frustration.

“Apparently that’s what happens. Every time we choose wrong we are transported here to start over again,” Kyllan said softly.

“So this is more than just the shifter trial then. It must be time as well. Which means if we don’t choose correctly we may very well be stuck in an endless loop. I’d bet there are nine splits as it is the divine number of our kingdom,” I declared, once again finding sure footing on my confidence.

“Okay, so one of us needs to keep track of the correct tunnels, so far we have two lefts. If we are going to be losing time we need to make up for it by remembering the order. Let’s do two lefts then a right,” he said, nodding toward the tunnels.

I took his hand in mine and entered the tunnel to the left once again. We chose left again and were met with two more tunnels once we stepped through. Kyllan looked at me hesitantly before pulling



me into the right one. I let out a sigh of relief when once again two tunnels stood before us.

“Left or right Ky?” I asked, giving him a sidelong glance.

He furrowed his brow and said, “Left. If this is wrong we’ve done two lefts and one right.”

I took a deep breath and we stepped into the tunnel. The breath rushed from my lungs as I exhaled in relief. Two tunnels stood before us once more.

“Halfway there. Gotta be left again. If there’s any sort of pattern to this anyway,” he stated, the confidence in his tone growing.

We took a step into the tunnel to the left and were once again transported back to the original set of tunnels.

“Dammit!” Kyllan screamed and it echoed throughout the cave.

“Um, so two lefts then a right a left then another right,” I repeated the order aloud. “From there we only have four left.” I could feel my confidence waning.

“Let’s go, quickly. We have lost time to make up for,” he said, his annoyance at this trial showing in his voice.

We made our way through the labyrinth of tunnels to the sixth set. Kyllan strode toward the one on the left and I cast my arm out, halting his steps.

As sudden as a crash of thunder, I had a thought. “I want to try something. Instead of trying to guess the correct path, we should be able to feel the magik of the shifted tunnel. We just have to concentrate hard enough,” I reminded him.

“Yea. I’m not doing that, so you have fun. We don’t have an ounce of magik between us, how are we supposed to sense it?” He scoffed dismissively.

I frowned at him. How could he lose faith so easily? Determined to prove him wrong, I closed my eyes and pressed my palm flat against the wall next to the right tunnel. The stone beneath my palm radiated with nothing more than coolness from the earth. Sighing I moved to the wall next to the left tunnel and repeated the process. The stone was just as cool but there was something else. Acting on my hunch I slid my hand across the stone wall and smiled as I felt the familiar hum of magik.

“It’s the right one,” I said with renewed confidence in my instincts.

“How can you be sure?” He mused.

“I’ve sat my ass on enough magikally altered objects to be able to recognize the hum of magik beneath my skin. It’s exactly as we were taught at Greenbriar.” I smiled.

We stepped through the tunnel to the right and sure enough, my instincts had been right. I let out a triumphant cheer.

Kyllan smiled. “Now do that two more times and get us out of this bloody maze.”

“You try. Just close your eyes and focus on finding the hum of the magik,” I suggested.

He stepped forward and placed a hesitant hand against the wall next to the left tunnel entrance. He closed his eyes and let his hand rest there a bit before frowning and moving to the one on the right. His eyes popped open and he smiled triumphantly.

“It’s this one!” He exclaimed. “I felt it.”

We stepped into the tunnel and were once again met with two tunnels. “Last one.” Kyllan murmured. “Hopefully anyway.”

A slew of curses sounded behind us and we exchanged a look before breaking out into laughter. It seemed that we were not the only ones who’d had difficulty navigating the maze.

“Together?” I asked quietly.

“Together.” He said.

He reached down and took my hand in his then placed them both against the stone next to the right tunnel. I closed my eyes and searched for the familiar hum. Kyllan pulled me to the tunnel to the left and placed our hands there. The hum was strong here, much stronger than it had been before. I smiled knowingly at him. This had to be the last one.

“Let’s get out of this hell,” he said excitedly.

“Please.” I laughed.

Together, we stepped into the right tunnel entrance. I let out a squeal of excitement when the tunnel extended forward. There were no more tunnel entrances to navigate through.

“We did it!” I exclaimed.

“Thank the Mother that’s over.” He sighed with relief. “Come on let’s, see what’s next.”

We ventured along the tunnel as it banked to the left then back to the right. I wonder how long we'd been down here. It was growing quiet and I had a sneaking suspicion that the hour was late. Though I'd not seen any of the dark fae soldiers with food or water as Lady Reyna promised.

The tunnel was fast approaching its end and a large round room came into view. Two groups of male vilande were sitting to the left side, chatting amongst themselves.

"The maze was rough, huh?" One of them asked as we stepped into the room.

"You could say that," I said nervously.

"That's why we stopped here, figured we needed a break before trying to get through more fucking tunnels." Another spoke.

*Huh? More tunnels?* I looked up and saw three large tunnels looming before us. Horror must have been plastered on my face because one of the other vilande began laughing.

"Too hard for you, little one?" He chided.

"Won't have room for your purse?" Another chimed in, and I recognized him as the male that stood in front of us outside the cave.

Kyllan bared his teeth and I held him back. I sat my bag down and gave him a short nod before rounding on the group of males.

"I suggest you boys think long and hard about the next thing that comes out of your mouths before you lose your teeth," I growled at them.

"What will you do, little one? Beat us with your purse?" The first laughed.

Wrong move. I pulled back my arm and threw all of my weight behind my fist. The punch landed against his jaw and he toppled over, holding his face. The other looked at me in disbelief.

"My father is a Commander. Did you really think I wouldn't know how to defend myself from vile males?" I asked rhetorically.

I grabbed my bag and made for the tunnels.

"I wouldn't if I were you. Those tunnels are unstable. The middle one collapsed on itself when I went to enter it," a voice said quietly.

"Who said that?" I asked, glancing between the two groups.

The silver haired male rose to his feet. His harsh jawline contrasted against the softness in brown eyes.

“Who are you?” Kyllan asked, moving to stand beside me.

“My name is Ezra. And who might you two be?” He asked curiously.

“I’m Kyllan and this is Asena. We are from Herbexia.”

He chuckled to himself. “Ah, yes. You must be Commander Montalli’s daughter. I’d heard you were Awakening this year, it’s nice to see he taught his daughter more than just how to play nice with others.”

“That’s me,” I confirmed, crossing my arms.

A dark fae male appeared suddenly with a large basket. He sat it down across the room and dispelled without so much as a word to any of us. I approached the basket first, retrieving a canteen each for Kyllan and myself. My hand dug deeper, finding a loaf of bread and a bit of fruit. It wasn’t much but it would sate our hunger for the night. I plopped down on the ground a few feet from the basket, once the others went to sleep I could take whatever canteens remained and stuff them in my bag along with the bread. We had to be smart to make our provisions last and keep our strength up. I for one was going to make sure we made it out of this cave with our powers. I’d not only vowed it to Kyllan but I’d promised Allerick I’d look after him.

# CHAPTER



# 30

## *Asena*

“Ase,” Kyllan said, his voice almost a whisper. “Come on, Ase, we’ve got to get moving if we want to make good time.”

I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. Stretching my arms above my head, I looked around. The two groups of vilande had become a huddled heap of curled bodies during the night. No doubt using each other’s body heat to stay warm. I got to my feet and quickly stretched my legs in a side lunge pose. Kyllan smirked at me but said nothing. *I’d never hear the end of this one.*

We crept over to the tunnels and I pointed to the left one but Kyllan shook his head, pointing to the one at the far right.

“Remember the tale of the original Awakening?” He asked in a hushed tone. “They took this tunnel to get through.”

“And who’s to say these don’t all lead to the same place?” I asked, keeping my voice no higher than a whisper.

He scowled at me in response and hauled himself up into the mouth of the right tunnel. I let out a sigh and ambled over to the tunnel, lifting my bag up and placing it in the entrance. He leaned forward slightly on his knees, bracing a hand against the cave floor and reaching the other out to me. I grasped hold of it and hoisted myself up.

“Thanks for the lift,” I said grumpily, still exhausted from yesterday’s events.

We hesitated before moving through the tunnel, the walls around us trembling as we went. Dirt and stone shook loose from the walls as the tunnel began to change shape, the top dropping rapidly. I let out a scream and began running back the way we came, the canteens in my

bag clanging together loudly. Kyllan's footsteps thundered behind me, I cast a glance back at him and saw the cave in behind us. The tunnel shrank faster as we ran, growing smaller and smaller until we were forced to dive flat on our stomachs. My bag crashed to the floor and I let out a painful groan as I fell on top of it. Then it stopped. Staying just big enough for us to crawl through on our bellies.

"Ase, you okay up there?" Kyllan called behind me.

"Yea. Just thankful we didn't get pancaked by my father's magik," I said breathlessly.

He let out a low laugh. "Thank the Crystal for that. Can you move at all?"

I wiggled back and forth a bit, bringing my arms up and pulled myself forward. "A little, yea. Let's see if we can make it back. Then I guess we'll take the left side tunnel."

"I'm following you, love," he said.

The sleeve of my leathers scraped along the rough floor of the cave tunnel and I was immensely thankful for the barrier between it and my skin. The last thing I needed was to have dirt covered scraps and cuts to worry about. We crawled along for several more minutes until we finally reached the beginning of the tunnel. A strong set of hands pulled me out and steadied me. I dusted my leathers off and returned upright to thank the male but all I saw was the back of his silver hair as he pulled Kyllan from the tunnel.

"I heard you two scream just before the rumbling started. The same thing happened with the middle tunnel yesterday when Jonah tried running through it," Ezra said, jabbing a thumb in the direction of one of the sleeping males.

"So I guess we try the left tunnel then." Kyllan shrugged.

"Well seeing as it's the one that the original nine took when they Awakened I thought it to be the natural choice for everyone. But it seems my assumptions were wrong," Ezra stated, looking us over.

"We were taught that they took the right tunnel," I explained, looking from Kyllan to Ezra. "Where are you from that you learned different?"

With prideful eyes he spoke firmly. "Vekroth. That story was handed down to Lord Elias directly from the Fallen King Ravi himself. He was one of the first commanders of the Crimson Legion, as he was the only one with the knowledge of our realms power. It's the first story they teach us at Sunniva and it is the first story I will hear when I return home as a Dragonian soldier."

“Would you like to trek the rest of the way with us?” Kyllan asked. “Ase has enough canteens and bread in her bag for all of us until they bring more in tonight.”

*Did he really just invite someone to carry on with us without even asking me? Well, at least Ezra seemed harmless enough.* Ezra cast a look over his shoulder at the group of males sleeping on the ground behind him. He let out a sigh before turning his attention back to Kyllan and I.

“I suppose a change of scenery won’t hurt. Besides, if I wait for this useless lot to wake up, I’ll be here half the day.” He replied, gesturing over his shoulder toward the sleeping pile of vilande.

Ezra walked forward toward the left tunnel and hoisted himself into the opening. Kyllan did the same and they both turned to offer me a hand. As I’d done before, I tossed my bag in the tunnel and grabbed their hands. My feet pushed off the ground hard and the boys pulled me up into the opening.

“Thanks,” I said quietly, still feeling a little dejected about Ky inviting a stranger to join us on one of the most important journeys of our lives.

Ezra nodded and set off down the tunnel, leaving Kyllan and I to follow him. We remained a few steps back just in case the walls started to cave in again.

“It’s okay that I asked him to join us, right?” Kyllan asked softly.

“Of course,” I lied.

I’d wanted to have some time alone with Kyllan before we reached the Crystal. Once we both acquired our powers from it, there was a possibility our world would be changed forever. I wanted to relish these moments with him as though they were my last. *It will be fine. We will both gain the power to shift the earth and return home.* I reassured myself.

The tunnel twisted and turned, growing narrow in places so that only one of us could fit through at a time. But the ground never faltered. The walls never shook.

“Watch your step up here, there’s a pretty steep downslide,” Ezra called back to us.

He braced himself against the walls and slowly crept down the slope. I inched further towards it as he disappeared from view. Kyllan moved past me and blocked my path.

“I’m going first,” he stated. “I need to be able to call out instructions to you as you go down to keep your footing steady.”

“Can you stop pretending I’m some frail and fragile thing that will break if I fall over?” I scoffed. “I’m a big girl, Kyllan. And if history has taught me anything it’s that fate is uncertain, so I probably won’t always have you around to *look out* for me. Let me do this on my own.” I could feel my jaw setting stubbornly as I ground my teeth together.

“I don’t treat you like you’re breakable, Ase,” he started to argue, but I cut him off.

I shook my head. “But you do. You do it so often you don’t realize it anymore. It’s like you’re so caught up in *protecting* me I don’t even have the chance to do things for myself when they prove to be just a little bit challenging,” I muttered.

He opened his mouth to reply but was cut off by Ezra’s voice carrying up the slope.

“It’s not so bad guys. As long as you go slow and sure up your footing before shifting your weight you should be fine,” he called up from below.

I gave Kyllan a look to say “*see*” before shoving past him and starting my descent. My hands remained firmly pressed against each wall and I slowly moved my feet. I heeded Ezra’s advice and made absolutely certain of my footing as I shifted my weight from one leg to the other. The slope steeped even more toward the end and part of me wondered if I should have just slid down the thing.

“Almost there Asena. That’s it,” Ezra exclaimed in an encouraging voice.

As I took my final steps and exited the tunnel, the temperature in the cave plummeted. A shiver ran through me and I stepped closer to Ezra in an attempt to soak up some of his body heat.

“Alright, Ky. It’s easier than you think. Just brace yourself against the walls and take it slow,” I called.

Silence. *Great*. I didn’t want to fight with him but I didn’t want to be coddled either. Especially not in the presence of another male that we barely knew. The sound of boots rustling cued me into the fact that Kyllan had begun his descent to meet us. His feet came into view a few moments later. He brought his hands up, rubbing his upper arms as he exited the tunnel. It seemed as though the temperature was near freezing down here.

“Halfway there,” Kyllan said, smiling at me.

I took his hand in mine and returned his smile. “Glad to see you aren’t mad.”



“I’m sorry, Ase. I promise to be better, it’s just that these trials have me a bit on edge,” he said, giving me a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Come on lovebirds,” Ezra called to us, a hint of amusement to his tone.

We turned and continued on to the next room of the cave. I made a mental checklist of the trials we’d been through thus far. First was Air, then Water, followed by Time and Shifters, and we’d just made it through Earth. The easy ones were out of the way, which meant the challenges would be getting progressively harder the further we went.

“So only Ice, Fire, Gravity and Electricity remain,” I informed the boys.

“The council saved the hardest elements to combat for last then,” Ezra commented.

Kyllan just nodded and placed an arm over my shoulder as we moved down the corridor.

# CHAPTER



# 31

## *Asena*

We'd been moving through the cave at a good pace. So far, other than the Earth tunnels, we'd not come upon another trial yet. I supposed we should be thankful for that. The thought of being frozen to death by ice or fighting fire with my bare hands didn't really invoke feelings of excitement within me.

"So what's Herbexia like?" Ezra asked curiously.

Kyllan looked at me and I shrugged. "It's gorgeous. The elves truly use their gifts for the betterment of the realm. You could walk the same road everyday and there would be something new to see each time, whether it be a new patch of flowers or mountains in the distance."

"That would certainly keep you on your toes." Ezra replied with a laugh. "Vekroth is the same day in and day out. Though you should see it in the winter. It's so awesome! Lord Elias, Commander Ryker and his three captains place small little infernos around Soleia to keep the homeless Dragonian's warm. They even started hosting a dinner for the entire realm last year during the Winter Solstice." He smiled as he thought of his home, pride shone through him as he spoke about it.

"I wouldn't have expected that of them. They had quite the cold exterior when we met them at Antheia Palace for the Summer Solstice." Kyllan retorted.

I just nodded in agreement. Crystal knows I didn't want to open that wound again. Silence fell between the three of us as we continued walking, and after a while the tension seemed to dissipate.

The tunnel twisted to the left and began opening wider. Thank the Mother. I was ready to be out of the small space, even if just for a

moment. As the next cavern room came into view the sight of the expansive lake caught my eye. It spread the entire length and width of the floor, save for a small bit at either end of the room. I could only hope it wasn't so deep we'd have to completely submerge ourselves.

"Well isn't this wonderful?" Ezra huffed. "Now we get to be cold *and* wet."

"Hopefully it isn't too deep," I added, not loving the idea of being completely submerged underwater in the cave's frigid temperatures.

Kyllan choked out a laugh, joined a second later by Ezra. "Ase, I love you but there's no way we don't have to dive into this thing."

"But we've already gone through our water trial, so this very well could just be a lake in the cave," I retorted, feeling myself become defensive at Kyllan's laughter at my expense.

They stopped instantly and exchanged a glance. I swallowed down the lump in my throat as I looked at the lake again. We'd gone through the water trial, so why did I have the sinking feeling there was more to the glowing water in front of us than met the eye.

Kyllan and Ezra were discussing amongst themselves, trying to find a way across without entering the water. Both afraid of what may lie under the surface. Apparently Ezra wasn't entirely convinced the shifter trial was the first set of tunnels, he was convinced it was only time. I'd laughed when he first told us. How else would you explain the second tunnel? He didn't have an answer for that one.

Shrugging, I shored up my bag and wadded off into the lake. Hell if I was going to stand around and think about what it might be. So far so good, nothing swam through the waters and it did appear to be just water.

A gasp echoed through the cave around us. "Asena what are you doing?" Kyllan shouted.

I turned to face him, "I'm trying to conquer fate. I'll be damned if I'm going to let a bit of water stand in the way," I said, spinning back around continuing to cross the lake. "Though you two can feel free to join me whenever you like."

Water splashed as they entered the lake behind me. I was far enough in that the water was up to my waist, and though I had a decent lead on the boys they caught up fairly quickly. I held in a laugh as I fell behind them and dipped below the water, pulling Kyllan's legs out from under him so he fell under the surface. Ezra burst into laughter as I popped my head above the water.

Kyllan emerged a moment later, his blond hair plastered to his forehead. He lunged at me, and I dodged him at the last moment. He collided with Ezra, dragging him below the surface. My laughter grew and grew until I realized they didn't break through the surface. I felt their hands wrap around my ankles and dread filled me. They tugged me below the water with them a moment later.

I swatted at them beneath the water to no avail. It felt so good to joke around and laugh in the midst of something that had been the source of my anxiety. We kicked off the bottom of the lake together, aiming for the surface. In the midst of our joking and horseplay, we'd actually managed to make it further along. We were just past halfway, where the water was deepest.

My arms stretched above me, longing for the surface as I swam upward. I broke through the surface of the water but found myself constricted. The boys broke through just as my panic set in. We were trapped beneath a barrier of ice, with just enough room to catch our breath above the water.

"That overgrown icicle! Of course he'd try to kill all of us," Ezra spat, anger rolling off of him in waves.

"Focus on being mad at the frosty fucker later. For now let's work on getting the hell out of here," Kyllan said, testing the ice overhead for weaknesses.

Anxiety began to set in as I watched Kyllan and Ezra swim to the edges, looking for a place to squeeze through. Round and round and round they went, pushing and punching the ice above them all to no avail. Fear rendered me frozen in place. All I could do was watch them become defeated while I fought to remain afloat. The water became frigid and my leathers were soaked through.

"We've got to find a way out of here," I said through chattering teeth.

"We're working on it, Ase. Just hold tight. Keep fighting," Kyllan said, trying to remain calm.

"Why not swim back so you can at least touch the bottom. Save your strength lovely," Ezra added.

Kyllan cast daggers in Ezra's direction at the addition of the little nickname he'd given me in the moment. I ignored them and swam back the way we came until I reached a point that I could sit with my head above water. My limbs thanked me for the reprieve I'd provided them, and I was silently thankful for Ezra's suggestion.

"Once we get out of this fucking water I never want to see another lake or pond again," I called toward them.

“You can say that again. I never much cared for swimming in the first place. Fire and water typically don’t mix well,” Ezra replied.

“But you don’t *know* that you have fire lurking in your veins. If you did, you could just burn a hole in the ice for us to crawl through,” Kyllan said, a little too snarkily to be taken as playful banter.

*What is his deal? Anytime another male shows a hint of kindness toward me he turns into this overprotective ass. This is exactly what I was afraid of.* I thought to myself.

“No I suppose not,” Ezra frowned and returned to searching for a crack in the ice.

Kyllan swam back toward me in defeat. He sat beside me, having to lean back slightly due to his height.

“Ase I’m so sorry. I…” He paused. “I feel I’ve broken my vow to you. I don’t know if I can get us out of this one.”

“You’re forgetting that I vowed the same to you, and I haven’t tried.” I bit my lip nervously. “Stay here, I want to try something,” I said, deciding for the moment to forget about his jealous behavior in favor of finding a way out of the frigid water.

I swam back and forth across the lake, running my hand along the underside of the ice. Kyllan’s eyes lit with recognition at what I was doing.

“What’s she doing?” Ezra asked, swimming up to sit next to Kyllan.

“She’s trying to feel for the weak spot,” he whispered.

“What?” Ezra asked, confused.

“At Greenbriar they taught us to feel for magik. It has a specific hum that you can feel. Here, reach your hand up and concentrate on nothing but what you feel. Close your eyes if you need to,” Kyllan explained, apparently also deciding to put his disdain aside for the time being.

Ezra cocked his eyebrow in Kyllan’s direction but did as he instructed. He lifted a hand above him and placed it flat to the ice above. After a few minutes his eyes popped open with wonder.

“I can feel it!” He exclaimed.

“Good. Now the hum will be more recognizable the stronger the magik, and when you can hardly feel it at all, that’s where it’s weakest,” I called toward them.

Ezra sat there, still in awe of the feel of the magik running beneath his hand. He cast a smile at Kyllan, who surprisingly returned it.

“Don’t just sit there! Help me find the weak spot,” I shouted at the two of them.

Ezra let his hand fall and they began swimming about, with one hand stretched above their heads. We swam from one side of the lake to the other, covering every inch of the ice. *Where the hell is it?!* I swam back toward where I’d been seated with Kyllan. My hand faltered, almost falling from the ice above me when I felt it. The hum was barely there and I became still. I started pushing on the ice but it was no use, I’d need to punch through it. We’d been in the water too long and I wasn’t sure if I could do it on my own.

“I found it!” I called out.

Splashes echoed around me as they both swam hurriedly toward me. I began punching at the ice above me, doing more damage to my fist than the ice itself. As I punched the ice, thoughts raced through my mind. *This trial was designed for you to fail if you were moving through the cave alone. It was almost as if Castian and the other Frost Elves didn’t want anyone to become Awakened, but why?*

“I can’t get it,” I admitted once they reached me.

They each began punching and pushing at the ice, it barely did more than fracture. Maybe I’d been wrong about the spot. I put a hand up to the ice again, sure enough it was still just as weak of a hum as I’d experienced before. So how were we to break through? Maybe if we all tried at the same time, the weight of one fist wasn’t strong enough so surely three had to work.

“Stop, stop!” I called out. “One person can’t do it alone. We have to try all together or we really will be stuck here forever.”

Both of them gave me a bewildered look before dropping their hands back into the water.

“Okay on the count of three, punch with your left then right directly above you. Let’s try *not* to smash each other’s hands to bits, please,” I explained.

They nodded in understanding and I took a deep breath. Let’s hope this works. At the very least, the ice had to break more.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three. PUNCH!”

We threw our fists against the ice, colliding with a loud thud and then a crack. I glanced up, it was working. The ice began to shatter above us.

“Again!” I ordered. “Now!”

A loud crack sounded a moment before ice came crashing down on our heads. We let out a collective whoop of triumph.

“Kyllan, get on my shoulders and I’ll lift you out. Then I’ll lift out Asena and you can be there to pull her up. I’ll be able to jump up and out as long as you two can catch me.” Ezra suggested.

At once we fell into action, anxious to escape the frigid water. Ezra took a deep breath and dove beneath the surface. Kyllan’s eyes widened a moment before he rose into the air above me and Ezra’s head poked out from beneath the surface of the water. With a loud grunt Kyllan hoisted himself out of the water and disappeared through the hole in the ice above us.

“Ready?” He asked.

I nodded in response and he dove below the water again. He positioned himself between my legs and wrapped a hand around each of my calves. I bent my knees as he started to return upright and soon I was peering through the hole in the ice. Kyllan met me with a smile and an outstretched hand.

“Let’s get you out of there, beautiful,” he said, grasping me under my arms.

Ezra pushed my thighs upward as Kyllan pulled me through the ice. I crashed into him and cried tears of joy at being free from the ice that had imprisoned us.

“Don’t start celebrating just yet, love. We’ve still got to help Ezra,” he said, giving me a swift kiss and swiping away my tears. “Ready when you are buddy!”

The water below splashed and a loud grunt rang out as Ezra jumped up out of the water and clung to the edge of the ice. With gritted teeth he hung there as we scrambled over to him. We each grabbed onto one of his arms and pulled him from the water below, and he collapsed on his back.

“Fuck,” Ezra said, panting.

We fell into a fit of laughter. This day was shaping up to be chaotic and there was no telling what else the cave had in store for us. I sat up and looked around, the room was entirely coated in ice. It hadn’t been just the water but the walls and ceiling too. Even the stalactites that hung from the ceiling had been turned to icicles. I was about to lie back down when one fell and smashed to bits on the surface of the ice.

“Um guys. We should probably move off the ice. I wouldn’t want it to break and us get trapped again,” I whispered, careful not to create an echo that could loosen any more of the sharp rocks above us.

Ezra and Kyllan jolted upright as a second icicle fell. We scrambled to our feet and began running as hard as we could across the ice. I fell, my wet boots slipping on the ice below them.

“Come on Ase, you’re almost there,” Kyllan called out from the edge of the ice.

I looked up and saw them both there with encouraging looks cast in my direction. I hauled myself up and began running again, not as quickly this time. My feet began slipping again and I shifted my weight, recentering myself. I smiled as I regained traction and took off again. Finally, I crashed into them with a roar of triumph. The ice disappeared as I turned back to look at it. Rage at Castian and his bullshit trial rose in my veins. Mother above, I hated that fucking frost elf.



# CHAPTER



# 32

## *Asena*

My teeth were still chattering even though we'd been out of the freezing water for a while now. I'd abandoned my bag a ways back, it was doing me no favors now that its contents were sopping wet and heavy. We'd retrieved a canteen each from inside, thankful that the water hadn't frozen during our time spent beneath the ice.

"There seems to be a lot of hatred between the Dragonians and the Frost Elves," Kyllan commented as we walked.

Ezra barked out a laugh and shook his head. "You could say that again."

"Why?" I asked curiously.

Kyllan flashed me an incredulous look. You would've thought I'd asked what the meaning of life was or where babies came from or something. I didn't think it was too prying and it was slightly obvious that's where Ky was going with his line of questioning anyway.

"I don't know all the specifics, just what my brother has told me," Ezra began hesitantly. "But the feud between our realms dates back to the original nine. As you both know Lord Edmar rose up against King Ravi in an attempt to take the throne for himself. During the final days of the Great War, Castian's grandfather, Uriah, was fighting for Edmar, trying to make a path through the heart of Soleia right for Khisfire Palace and in turn, the throne. He made it all the way to the door of the throne room before he was cut down. High Lord Elias was just Commander Elias at the time, but he still holds the same sword today that he used to behead Uriah."

I furrowed my brow and asked, “how can one be sure it was Elias that beheaded him?”

“Because the wound was cauterized. Only the Dragonian Commander carries a blade that can be set alight with flame. And even if he’d given the sword to Elijah, who was his captain at the time, it wouldn’t have mattered. Castian’s captain claims to have seen the entire thing. Mystaria will forever be an enemy of Vekroth,” Ezra explained.

My eyes widened in surprise. The Great War took place over two hundred years ago. Surely he could forgive the son for the actions of the father by now. It wasn’t Ryker’s fault that his father did what he thought was best for the kingdom at the time. He had to know that with Edmar’s lust for power nothing good would have come from him sitting upon the throne. Things were better this way.

I’d been so lost in thought I almost tripped over a cluster of stalagmites protruding up from the cave floor. *Wait*, I thought, looking down at the cluster. They were in the shape of a tree. I remember seeing something about this in one of our textbooks from Greenbriar. *What was it?*

“Ase! It’s the formation Lady Selene made during her Awakening!” Kyllan exclaimed.

Ah yes. That’d be it. How he managed to remember, I’ll never know. “Oh wow! We must be close to the crystal then!”

“We still have three trials left, be alert you two,” Ezra added.

No sooner than the words left his lips I saw a familiar purple glow ahead. Lightning. *Well, here’s hoping we don’t get electrocuted after almost freezing to death.*

“Seems we’ve come upon the next one,” I said meekly, pointing towards the purple glow ahead.

Kyllan let out a sigh of relief and Ezra frowned. “Lady Reyna is a kind soul, or at least that’s the impression I got when we met her. The Rastian challenge won’t be designed to kill us, but most likely test our moxy,” Kyllan offered hopefully.

“Let’s hope you’re right,” Ezra replied.

Thunder cracked throughout the cave around us as we approached the short tunnel. Lightning struck horizontally in different waves, some high and some low. I stood there, mesmerized by the crackling electrical current that darted across the room.

“You don’t suppose we could get lucky and this would be a test like the waterfall do you?” Ezra asked jokingly.

“No E, unfortunately I think we have to navigate through this shit. *Without* getting electrocuted,” Kyllan responded, his voice void of emotion.

I continued staring at the lighting as it struck, always in the same place. My gaze dropped to the floor, hoping it was possible we could just crawl beneath it. That hope was crushed as several thick bolts struck along the bottom of the tunnel walls.

“There’s a pattern, we just have to figure out what it is,” Ezra announced. “It’s like the beginning and end will strike before the middle ones do. Though the bottom is tricky, we may have to jump at times.”

*How had he figured the timing out so quickly?* I was so used to being the problem solver, though I had to admit it was nice to be in the company of another one. Ezra entered the tunnel slowly, then darted to the middle, jumping twice. He ducked just as the lightning struck the top and dove through the middle of two bolts to exit the tunnel. He jumped up and whooped in celebration.

“Congrats mate! Now want to tell us how to get through?” Kyllan laughed.

“Okay. One at a time do exactly as I say. Only one of you can be in the tunnel at a time,” Ezra replied.

I turned to Kyllan. “You go first, I want to watch one more time before I go.”

“If you’re sure,” he replied hesitantly.

“I am. Now go.” I shooed him towards the tunnel.

“Okay, when you see the bolts move to the middle enter then move as I tell you. I will say forward, jump, duck, or dive. Got it?” Ezra called from the opposite side of the tunnel.

“Got it!” Kyllan yelled back.

“Okay, go!” Ezra commanded. “Forward.”

Kyllan moved to the middle of the tunnel just in time. I’d need to remember to move as soon as I heard the first syllable come from him.

“Jump twice!” Ezra called out again.

Kyllan looked down and jumped twice, as if skipping rope with the lightning bolts.

“Duck then quickly dive.”

Kyllan ducked and the lightning singed off a bit of his hair. Wasting no time he quickly dove through the final two bolts and rolled onto the

floor next to where Ezra now stood. Ezra offered him a hand and hauled him up, clapping him in congratulations on the back.

“Ase, be sure to listen to Ezra. You’ve got to move quickly, okay?” Kyllan called.

“Already planned on it. Ezra when you’re ready,” I responded.

I took a deep breath and entered the tunnel just as the bolts disappeared. “Forward,” he called and I began moving the moment his voice met my ears.

“Good, now jump twice.” I turned my attention downward and jumped over the bolts as they struck close to the ground.

“Duck!” I quickly ducked then dove through the final two bolts before he could get the last instructions out.

I rolled forward, my momentum guiding me up to my feet and I spun around with a smirk on my face.

“You’re pretty agile, red,” Ezra noted.

We both glanced at Kyllan who seemed unphased by this nickname. Apparently it was only ones that could be deemed as flirtatious that he had an issue with. *Good to know.*

“That was awesome!” Kyllan exclaimed.

“It was quite the rush,” Ezra agreed.

“You two are madmen, though I know what you mean. It was pretty awesome to dive through those final two bolts!” I joked.

We turned to face yet another tunnel. *Please let us make it through this one without being lifted from the ground or set on fire.* Kyllan approached it with an outstretched hand, searching for the hum of magik. We’d learned our lesson with the ice from the lake and didn’t want a repeat.

I untied my canteen from the loop on my leathers and brought it up to take a swig. The cool water ran over my tongue, quenching my thirst as I drank from it. A rustling sound came from the room beyond the tunnel we were now staring down. How late was it?

“That’ll be dinner.” Ezra commented.

“The tunnel appears to be magik free. Let’s go, we can eat and rest for the night if you two are okay with that. It’ll just leave us two trials tomorrow,” Kyllan suggested.

“Sounds good to me, Ezra?” I added.

“Works for me. Tomorrow we will just have fire and gravity left,” He agreed.

One by one we climbed into the tunnel. It was quite a bit shorter than the others had been, causing us to have to walk in a crouched state to fit inside. I kept my hands on the walls as I walked, constantly searching for the hum of magik. Maybe that was part of the reasoning for the trials themselves, to teach us to be more aware of our surroundings. That would certainly prove useful in battle. I found myself feeling slightly less annoyed with the council for putting us through the trials. Only slightly. I still didn't think I'd be forgiving Castian for trying to drown us anytime soon.

The tunnel veered right and finally came to an end, bringing us into a brightly lit room. Fire crackled to life as our feet touched the ground of the room, the exit blocked by flames shooting up from the ground. But there beyond it, I could see the faint glow of something. No matter how hard I squinted I couldn't see through the flickering flames.

“So it seems we'll be walking through fire when we wake up,” Ezra laughed. “Fucking great one, Ryker. This has him written all over it.”

He walked over to the basket that had been deposited by the Dark Fae and fished out a fresh canteen and a bit of fruit. I walked over and began rooting around in the basket, elated to find a block of cheese and more bread.

“It sounds like you know him quite well,” I noted, taking a bite of bread and cheese.

Kyllan came to the basket beside me and fished out a few more bits of bread and two apples. I couldn't wait to get out of here and get real food.

“I'd hope so,” Ezra laughed as he slumped down next to the fire. “My brother is one of his captains and closest friends.”

I walked over and ambled to the floor next to him, breaking off a bit of the cheese for him and Kyllan. So he, like me, had a foothold in his home realm's army. I couldn't really hold that against him, though it was easy to see why he was so eager to get his wings and return home. He'd be welcomed with open arms, just as I would. We ate in silence, soaking up the heat from the fire, before we drifted off to sleep.

# CHAPTER



## 33

*Asena*

Kyllan's soft lips grazed my cheek as I stirred. A smile crept along my face as I remembered our time together in the bunker. Perhaps we could manage some alone time once we were back home.

"Time to walk through fire, love," he reminded me.

Ugh! I swear if I ever saw half of the high council again I'd let them know *exactly* where they could stick their trials. Flames, Ice, shifting tunnels and all. I groaned as I got to my feet. The idea of trying to fight fire and gravity today less than excited me.

"Well, Ezra. This one is your area of expertise. Any ideas?" I yawned.

He studied the flames and I took that opportunity to stretch my limbs. I bent down and grabbed my canteen from the floor and secured it in place on the loop of my leathers. Kyllan smirked in our direction, like he knew something we didn't. He walked over to the basket taking a spare canteen and dumping the water over the fire, dousing out the flames.

"Easy peasy." He smirked.

"You're a genius, you know that?" I said, dumbfoundedly.

Kyllan smiled at me and Ezra just shook his head, securing his own canteen before we continued on. I walked toward the opening and was almost to it when Ezra shot his arm out in front of me. Just in time to save me from the fire roaring back to life. He dragged me backwards away from the flames that stood before us once more, cursing under his breath.

“Any chance of being able to douse the flames long enough to get through?” I asked.

“Doubtful, they seemed to come to life when you got close again. I’d hate for one of us to be badly burned because we couldn’t move quick enough,” Ezra replied.

Kyllan blew out a breath of air and ran a hand through his hair, disheveling it further. The two of them really did look worse for the wear. I could only imagine how I looked, bits of my hair were plastered to my face where they’d dried there overnight.

“So how are we to get through then?” I asked.

The weight of the lightning flare in the pocket of my leathers became heavy, but I refused to acknowledge it. Giving up wasn’t an option. Not when we were this close. Even if things did seem bleak at the moment.

Ezra walked over to the flame and held his hands out. He closed his eyes and concentrated, no doubt trying to find a weak spot in the magik as we’d done with the ice. Though, I didn’t see how fire could have a weak spot. He dropped his hands and frowned.

“Any luck?” Kyllan asked.

“Unfortunately no. I couldn’t sense anything other than strong magik,” he replied flatly. “Though it was strange. I felt no heat from the flames.”

I cocked my head and cast a confused look at the flames beyond him. How could it be that flames held no heat? He had to be mistaken. I stalked over to the flames and held out a hand. Sure enough, there was no heat. *I wonder.* The tips of my fingers inched closer to the flames until they were touching it.

A hand grasped my arm pulling me back. “Asena, what are you doing? Are you crazy?” Kyllan asked, shaking me where he’d gripped my shoulders.

I just stared at the flames, mesmerized by them. Something told me they wouldn’t harm me. I just needed to figure out why.

“Let me see your hand,” Kyllan demanded, grabbing for my hand.

“I’m fine Ky really.” I said, pulling my hand out of his grip.

“Red, just let him see your damned hand. We both know he won’t let up until he makes sure you aren’t hurt. Though, since you didn’t yelp in pain, I’m going to assume you’re fine,” Ezra chided.

I huffed and held my hand out for Kyllan to inspect. He grabbed hold of it lightly, running his eyes over every inch before he dropped it.

“Satisfied?” I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Okay, okay. So the fire didn’t burn you, but what about us?” He cast a glance at Ezra who shrugged in response. “Well, I suppose there’s only one way to find out.”

Together, they strode over and held their hands to the flame. They winced slightly and pulled their hands back in unison. I rushed over to them, afraid that they’d been burned. When I took Kyllan’s hand in mine I saw no sign of scarred flesh. I turned it over, inspecting the other side before moving to Ezra and doing the same. A wave of confusion washed over me. If the flame hadn’t burned them, why did they look pained at its touch?

“What happened?” I asked, seeing clarity.

“It didn’t burn, it was just uncomfortably hot,” Kyllan answered quietly.

I frowned. The flames wouldn’t harm me and I could make it through them, but I couldn’t leave Kyllan. Even without the vow in place I wouldn’t do that to him.

“I could just try diving through them. I think I saw a bit of water on the other side. As much as I’d love to avoid going for a dip again, if it will help with the burning I’ll gladly dive in,” Ezra offered.

“Ezra, that’s crazy. You are absolutely not doing that!” I forbade.

“Yeah, bud. Thanks for trying but we can’t risk you being charred to a crisp before you get those shiny new wings,” Kyllan laughed.

Ezra’s face fell as he looked back at the flames. “What if…” He began before shaking his head. “Eh forget it. It probably wouldn’t work anyway.”

“What is it Ezra?” Kyllan asked.

“Don’t kill me for suggesting this.” He shot a look at Kyllan.



Kyllan laughed nervously. "I'll try, but I make no promises."

They both turned their attention to me, though I hardly noticed. The flames seemed to be calling me, enticing me forward once again. I'd become so ensnared by the call of them I'd tuned out Kyllan and Ezra altogether. My feet moved of their own accord toward the flames.

"That's crazy. I doubt she'd even go for it," Kyllan said, his tone laced with disbelief.

The sound of his voice brought me out of the trance the flames had placed me in. Something told me Ryker spelled them to let me pass without harm. But why?

"Why not let her decide then? If you aren't opposed," Ezra responded curtly.

I blinked at them. "I'm sorry, what am I deciding?"

"Ezra seems to have the crazy notion that the flames won't hurt you, even though he and I both felt the heat from them. It was next to unbearable," Kyllan scoffed.

"Right so I suggested that you take all the canteens over with you and douse the fire continuously so we can get through." Ezra smiled.

He seemed to think that was the greatest plan on the face of the fucking earth. Though reckless, it did seem like our best shot at the moment. If we were wrong, the cost would be great and I'm not sure Kyllan would ever forgive me for putting myself in danger like this.

I took a deep breath and said, "I'll do it."

"You will?" They said in unison, looking at me with wide eyes and gaping mouths.

"Yep. I don't see much of another option and the flames won't hurt me for whatever reason." Though I knew the reason and his name was Ryker.

We collected the remaining canteens from the basket and sat them in a pile by the wall. It was a good plan, other than the fact that Ezra seemed to think I could carry more than five canteens at a time. I'd suggested they keep the canteens on their side and toss them to me, as I could get closer to the flames than they could. With any luck the worst that would happen to them is they just get hot. Though something told me that wouldn't be the case.

"Alright. That's the last of them," I said, dropping my own canteen on the ground.

“Ase, you know you don’t have to do this right?” Kyllan reminded me.

“I know, but I want to. Don’t worry. I’ll be fine,” I replied, cupping the side of his face with my hand trying to comfort him.

He sighed in defeat and I gave them both a quick hug, just in case my instincts were wrong. I took a deep breath and approached the flames once more. Again, they called to me, beckoning me toward them like a beacon in the night. I stepped into them blindly and I heard a gasp echo around me. Though, I couldn’t be bothered to look to see where it came from, I was too enticed by the flames that licked deliciously at my skin. Only the sound of Kyllan and Ezra’s voices brought me out of the daze the fire placed me in. Remembering the task at hand, I stepped out of the flames and instantly missed their warmth.

The room around me had a preternatural glow that radiated throughout it, emitting from the lake in front of me. *Great, more water.* I turned my attention back to Kyllan and Ezra, I needed to help them get through the flames.

“Alright, start tossing canteens over the flames, aim high but don’t throw them too hard.” I hollered.

“Here comes the first two,” Kyllan called back.

With a grunt from the other side of the flames, the canteens were in the air. I jumped up grabbing one as the other fell to the ground in front of me. We repeated the process four more times, getting all ten canteens over the fire.

“Okay, I’m going to start pouring. You two run one at a time as fast as you can and dive through them. There’s a lake on this side, worst case you end up wet but it’ll put the flames out if you happen to catch fire,” I said solemnly.

“Ase, I’m coming first,” Kyllan called.

I stepped up to the flames once more and doused them with a canteen. Kyllan’s footsteps thundered as he ran, the flames started back up just as he reached them and I quickly started dousing them again. He dove through the small flames and landed in the lake beyond me.

“Did he make it?” Ezra asked loudly.

“I don’t know, I can’t see him. He landed in the water,” I said nervously.

I picked up two more canteens and poured them on the flames, allowing Ezra to step through to the other side. The canteens clinked together as I abandoned them on the ground. I needed to find Kyllan beneath the water as he still hadn't surfaced. My eyes searched and searched but found nothing. I was really beginning to worry when suddenly he emerged from the lake, hauling himself up on the edge beside me. He'd just managed to stand upright when I tackled him to the ground in an embrace.

"I thought I'd lost you for a minute there," I admitted, my heart still hammering in my chest.

"You won't get rid of me that easily," He replied, wrapping his arms around me.

He gripped the sides of my face and brought my lips crashing down onto his. Heat flowed through me as passion built in my core. His hands roamed down my back and firmly gripped my ass. *Mother above, I missed this.* I was so consumed by him I hadn't heard the loud splash behind us.

"Ahem." Ezra cleared his throat.

We broke apart suddenly. My face flush with embarrassment. I'd never been big on public displays of affection, not like this anyway.

"Forget about me?" He chuckled.

"Sorry, bud. I just saw Ase and got a little carried away," Kyllan laughed.

I inspected both of them and they seemed fine enough. Their clothes were a little singed, but it appeared as though the fire hadn't actually harmed them. Thank the Crystal for that.

# CHAPTER



## 34

### *Asena*

*Great. Another fucking lake,* and there wasn't a way around it. We could only swim through it and hope the council didn't try to drown us this time.

"Is that?" Kyllan gasped beside me pointing toward a glowing source high in the air.

*No, it couldn't be. Had we really made it?* Tears of joy threatened to erupt from within me, but I refused to let myself celebrate until my antlers were planted firmly atop my head.

"Don't get too excited, have you seen how we have to get up there?" Ezra asked bleakley.

I shook my head. "How?"

He pointed straight ahead and I squinted in effort to see what was beyond the glowing waters before us. I sighed in defeat, it was no use. I couldn't make out whatever it was. Just as I turned to ask what he'd seen, Kyllan spoke.

"That's a lot of fucking stairs," He gasped.

"Yep, and I'd bet that's where the last trial is. What better way to get us to beat gravity than literally shove us down the stairs with it." Ezra predicted.

I laughed nervously. "Well, better than being shoved below the water by it, I suppose."

"Yea. If it's anything like the Air trial at the start of the cave then we just need to find something to hold on to in order to make it to the top." Kyllan noted confidently.

“Oh that’s right! Okay so let’s focus on getting across this damned water then we can try to find something to hold onto to get up the stairs. If I’m right the gravity will just simply try to pull us back to the bottom of the staircase, we just have to make it past the threshold of the magik.” Ezra said.

We turned our attention back to the water in front of us. The glow within pulsed in rhythm with my heartbeat. Magik hung thickly in the air surrounding me, coating my body with its familiar hum. I’d felt a similar sensation while at the barracks, surrounded by the malachite crystals, but this was different. Stronger. More. The water enthralled me and I began mindlessly stepping toward it.

A loud splash came from my left and I whipped my head in that direction to see emptiness where Kyllan stood a moment ago. My heart rose in my throat, threatening to dislodge itself from my body as my eyes frantically searched the surface of the water, waiting for him to emerge. Several minutes passed and he hadn’t resurfaced. A painful cry of terror erupted from me and another splash sounded to my right. Ezra dove in after him. I slunk to the floor as tears streaked down my face. The fear that I’d lost him was too great, and my cuff was becoming heavy. I pulled the flare from my pocket and was about to smash it against the damp cave floor when a flicker of movement across the lake caught my attention. There on the other side stood two tall figures. Kyllan made it.

Abandoning the flare on the ground, I took a deep breath and dove in the illuminated waters. My feet paddled as fast as they could, propelling me forward, as I pulled myself across the lake with each stroke of my arms. The desire to reach Kyllan all that drove me in that moment. I paid no mind to the magik of the water wrapping around me, trying to call out to me again and tempt me to remain within it. Harder and harder I pushed myself to stay focused, to reach Kyllan.

My arm stretched forward once again and my hand was met with cold, damp stone. I’d done it. I’d reached the other side. I stretched my arms upward toward the males standing there. They just stood there, saying nothing, staring straight ahead.

“Help me up!” I called to them.

My words fell on deaf ears. Then it hit me. They couldn’t see or hear me, I’d have to pull myself up on my own. No matter. I gripped the edge of the rock and pushed upward, hauling myself up over the edge. My arms stretched forward, gripping the rough floor as best I could and I drug my body out of the water. I rolled over onto my back, panting, water rolling off my skin onto the ground below. Delectable coolness lapped at my body as I lay there trying to catch my breath.

“Ase!” Kyllan shouted, his tone flooded with relief. He dropped to the ground next to me, wrapped me in his arms and pulled me into his lap. Squeezing me tight enough to expel some of the water held within my leathers, he spoke again. “I couldn’t see you after you dove in. It’s like an illusion was cast over the water so that anyone looking on wouldn’t see who was inside it.”

I pulled back and soaked in the way he looked at me at that moment. Like I was all that mattered and all that would ever matter. Though our moment was cut short by the sound of footsteps rustling near. Looking up I saw Ezra there and once again I was overcome with relief. Though we’d only known him a very short time, I felt our friendship with him ran deeper than most would assume. He did dive in after Kyllan after all. I turned back to Kyllan.

“It was the same for me. For Ezra too,” I said quietly. “I almost flared myself out when I thought I lost you. Then I saw you and Ezra on the other side of the lake and just reacted. I wasn’t aware of myself until I reached the edge here and tried to shout for you.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “Ase, I’d never want you to sacrifice your power for me. Even if something had happened to me, I’d want you to carry on. To conquer your own fate.”

“But the vow!” I protested.

“To hell with the vow, Ase. If I die you’re released from it,” Kyllan retorted.

Ezra looked at us confused. “What vow?”

“Kyllan and I made a vow when we were younger to see each other through the cave to that Crystal. Though we didn’t know it at the time, we were bound together by the pact. We chose to finalize it just a few weeks ago and place the cuffs on our wrists, only to be removed once the vow was kept,” I explained.

Ezra frowned. “I wasn’t aware that’s what those meant. I’ll just go ahead then. I didn’t mean to impose.”

He turned and set off toward the towering staircase that loomed above us. It seemed he’d rather face being dragged back to the ground by Gravity than stay with us any longer.

“Ezra, what are you talking about? You being with us is fine,” Kyllan said.

His head turned to me, offering a half smile as he removed me from his lap and bolted to his feet. He jumped in front of Ezra, blocking his path. I scrambled to my feet, following after Kyllan so that I too could implore Ezra to stay with us. Ezra side-stepped Kyllan and set off for the

stairs again but found me blocking his path this time. I reached up and grasped his shoulders, refusing to let go.

“Stay. Let’s finish this thing together,” I offered, looking into his emerald eyes.

“I don’t need your pity,” he scoffed, knocking my arms away and stood at the base of the limestone staircase.

“Are you really upset because we didn’t tell you about a deal we’d made?” I shouted at him.

He was acting like a petulant child over something that seemed so minor to me. Kyllan placed a steadying hand on my shoulder and Ezra whirled on us.

“You two are so blind you don’t see it. Though it’s painfully obvious to me. So excuse me if I don’t want to fuck up your mating bond. That *deal* you made will just be the first of many. I may be wrong but it’s not like it matters, I won’t be seeing either of you after we exit this cave. That fucking Crystal will see to that. You two will get your Antlers and I will get my wings, then we can all return home and forget about our time in this bloody cave!” He shouted at us.

Kyllan and I stared at each other. *Mates*. Sure I’d always suspected, but our bond wasn’t like anything described in our books or by anyone we knew. Ezra looked between us.

“You really didn’t know?” He asked, the discomfort in his voice still clear.

We shook our heads. “We really didn’t. I’d always assumed but we were never certain.” I turned to Ezra. “You’re sure?”

“Pretty positive. I’ve seen it a few times back home. Hell, I saw my own brother through it with Kiira, Ryker’s second in command,” he confirmed. “You won’t know for sure until your power is awakened, but with all that you’ve experienced here in the cave I expect the bond will almost immediately snap into place.”

Kyllan beamed at me before sweeping me into his arms and kissing me hungrily. My mind was racing with the realization that I’d met my mate. Was I really so blinded to it for so long? But then, if Kyllan was my mate, how was I able to deny that bond for so long? I pushed away from him and sucked in a deep breath, suddenly feeling claustrophobic.

“I just don’t want to make it awkward for Ezra. We’ll have plenty of time for all that once we get out of this bloody cave,” I blurted out when I saw the questioning look on Kyllan’s face.

“Thank you, Red,” Ezra said, relief flooding his tone. “I’m sorry about the way I reacted. I just didn’t want to be here when you solidified

the bond, but since you don't want to make it weird I'll carry on with you. If that's okay?"

"Of course!" I exclaimed.

He brought me in for a quick hug before releasing me and turning to Kyllan offering him a hand. He took it without hesitation and brought Ezra in for a quick hug, slapping him lightly on the back before they released each other.

"Now, how the hell are we making it up those stairs?" Kyllan laughed.

"Well it's just as we said, find something to hold onto and pull ourselves up," Ezra reminded us.

My gaze shifted to the wall next to the stairs and disappointment ran through me. The wall was barren. Not the first vine, leaf, or bit of moss grew on it. I walked over to it and ran a hand across it. Smooth. Completely and utterly smooth. No grooves or dips. I stared up the stairs, hoping that would change and yet, nothing.

"That won't work," I said meekly. "There's nothing growing on it and the wall is too smooth to grasp hold of. We need a new plan."

Ezra cursed under his breath and Kyllan ran a hand over his face in frustration. How the hell were we supposed to get up there?

"Maybe the trial isn't on the stairs," I suggested.

But Ezra just shook his head. "It is, I could feel it when I walked away from you two before."

"There's nothing we can do but try. I say we have Ase go first as she's the lightest. If she gets pushed back, we have to be there to catch her." Kyllan spoke, his words laced with authority.

I took a deep breath and headed toward the base of the stairs, my feet squishing in my sodden boots as I walked. The toe of my boot scraped the front of the step as I lifted my foot to begin my ascent. I cast a glance over my shoulder and found the boys there, both giving me a nod of encouragement. A trickle of magik beckoned me forward and I looked up, surely the Crystal's effects couldn't be felt down here. I shook the thought from my mind and returned my focus to the looming staircase in front of me.

"Go on Ase, we're right here if you can't fight against the magik," Kyllan said encouragingly.

With another deep breath, I began my trek up once more. One foot at a time, step after step we traveled up the staircase. I turned to look behind us, seeing that we were a little over a quarter of the way up.



Hope blossomed within me, if this was the gravity trial, we were sailing right through without issue.

Up and up and up we climbed, our breaths becoming ragged the further we ascended. We were almost halfway up when I felt the shift in the weight of the air surrounding me, pushing down against my shoulders. A glance behind me told me Kyllan and Ezra felt it too.

“Figures it’d start about the time I want to rest.” I mumbled under my breath.

I leaned against the wall, sliding down it to rest momentarily. My legs were screaming at me to stop and I reached out to massage the muscles in my calves. Beside me, Kyllan and Ezra slunk to the ground as well.

“Getting up is going to be a challenge in itself. If any of us need to rest from here forward I’d suggest not sitting all the way down.” Ezra suggested.

“Agreed.” Kyllan and I said in unison.

We sat there for a moment longer, my feet basking in the relief I’d given them. Ezra was the first to stand, then Kyllan, each of them rising with ease. I put my hands on either side of me and pushed off the ground with minimal resistance.

“Let’s do this,” I said with a newfound determination.

Up and up and up and up we climbed. The gravity pushing down on us harder and harder the further we climbed. *One thousand, three hundred, twenty-seven. One thousand, three hundred, twenty-eight. One thousand, three hundred, twenty-nine.* I counted the steps as we made our ascent. The weight against my body was almost too much to bear. I slowed my pace and leaned against the wall, resting my sweat-ridden forehead against the cool, sleek wall.

“This is madness,” I said breathlessly, taking in gulps of air.

“It will be worth it in the end. Just keep your eye on the prize, Red,” Ezra managed between breaths.

Kyllan said nothing, only nodding in agreement as he too struggled to catch his breath. The staircase on its own would have been a feat. But with the added weight of the gravity pressing down on us, it threatened to break our resolve. I pushed off the wall and began my climb once again. My breaths became more and more labored the higher I climbed.

We had less than two hundred stairs to go and my legs were beginning to falter under the pressure. The unseen weight forced me to my knees.

“Ase, no!” Kyllan shouted.

“Come on Red, you’ve gotta get up,” Ezra encouraged.

They tried to pull me up but it was no use. My legs could no longer support the weight forced upon them by the trial. Through gritted teeth, I began climbing up the stairs on all fours. I cast a glance behind me to see Kyllan and Ezra standing there dumbfounded.

“Well come on then. Don’t just stand there and stare,” I growled with determination at them.

# CHAPTER



## 35

### *Asena*

My hand slapped down hard against the marbled floor atop the staircase, echoing throughout the cavern. Swearing, determined and panting I pulled myself up the final stair and collapsed flat against the delightfully cool marble floor. I'd made it, through sheer force of will I'd conquered the last trial. Tears of relief flooded my eyes and trickled down my face. A loud "oof" sounded beside me and I glanced over to see Kyllan and Ezra sprawled on the floor next to me.

The three of us laid there for a while. Once my breathing returned to normal, I sat up and crossed my legs in front of me. I took in my surroundings while I waited for the boys to finish catching their breath. Light radiated throughout the cavernous room, illuminating every inch of it save for the shadows that clung to the corners. Just to my right stood a massive oak tree, and I recalled my lessons about the original nine. This tree was the first thing crafted from Earth magik in all of Kinbrolds. There, just beyond it was a cluster of ice clinging to the wall left by Edmar after his power was Awakened. I turned my attention back to the boys when Ezra spoke.

"We did it," Ezra stated with pride as he too moved to sit upright.

Kyllan shifted his weight and sat cross legged in front of me. "I'm *really* not looking forward to going back down those fucking things," Kyllan laughed.

"With any luck, I'll be able to fly you down, mate," Ezra joked.

We fell into a fit of laughter at the thought. I could picture it now, his dragon wings flung out and each of us clinging to either side as he glided down to just beyond the water below.

“Watch out Ezra, you never know. One of us might end up with those wings you crave so much,” I said through my laughter.

Kyllan stopped laughing and stared at me. “Or maybe we all will get them.”

The thought of Kyllan and I flying through the sky together filled me with joy. I could picture us years from now teaching our own children to dive and twirl through the sky. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips and somehow I knew, he was picturing it too.

“Well no time to find out like the present. Do either of you mind if I go first?” Ezra asked cautiously.

“Not at all, brother. Go right ahead,” Kyllan said, clapping him on the back.

The three of us glanced toward the edge of the marble dais where a stone pedestal protruded from the floor. Atop it sat the most breathtaking kyanite crystal. I rubbed my eyes in disbelief, the crystal was marbled with blue and white and had the oddest of shapes. Each crystal I’d seen growing up was almost smooth or fashioned into a single tower. This one was still in its raw form, with several tower shaped protrusions of different heights and sizes.

A low hum found its way to my ears as Ezra rose to his feet and approached the Crystal cautiously. The glow from within it grew stronger as he drew nearer. He clasped his hand firmly around the center tower and a purple light erupted from within the crystal, wrapping around him.

I felt my mouth drop open in awe as he was lifted off the ground, surrounded by streaks of lightning. Ezra’s eyes opened wide with surprise and elation as the lightning that surrounded him dove beneath his skin. His face twisted in agony as two large black feathered wings sprouted from his back. A pair of jet black horns grew taller and taller from the top of his head. Swirling markings appeared on his forearms and around his neck, dipping down toward his collar bones then up over his shoulders. The crystal began to relinquish its grip on him, and the once brilliant purple light diminished. Ezra returned back to the ground and we stared at him in complete and utter shock.

“Dark Fae,” I managed. “The Crystal, it made you Dark Fae.”

He shook his head. “No, that can’t be right! I felt the wings burst from my back and the horns grow atop my head,” he said, his voice panicked.

“She’s telling the truth mate,” Kyllan said almost too calmly. “Focus on that bit of wall there and try to shoot your magik at it,” he continued, gesturing toward the dark stone wall across the cavern.

With a determined look, Ezra shifted into an offensive stance and thrust his hands out in front of him. Nothing happened. No magik came from him, despite the concentrated expression he wore. His brow furrowed in anger and suddenly a shockwave of brilliant purple lightning shot across the cavern, singing the wall across from us. Ezra looked down at his hands in disbelief as he fell to his knees. A hiss escaped him as his wings grazed the floor and he winced in discomfort as he lifted them off of the ground.

“I don’t understand,” he said, shaking his head. “My bloodline has been Dragonian as far back as I can recall. How can I face them?”

Kyllan clasped a hand on his shoulder. “Together. We’ll be standing by your side when you exit the cave, Ezra.”

He flashed us a thankful smile as he clambered up to his feet, his wings causing his movements to appear slightly off kilter. “Thanks you two. Now go on. Let’s see those antlers.”

I made to step forward but Kyllan shot his arm out in front of me. “Ase, we know without a doubt you’re getting those antlers. Mind if I go next?” He asked, turning to face me.

“Of course not Ky. Go ahead,” I answered sweetly.

He inched forward hesitantly before he turned back to ask, “Does it hurt?”

“Just a little, more uncomfortable than anything. The wings were the worst part, but you don’t have to worry about that mate. Now go on then,” Ezra replied.

Kyllan let a deep sighing breath loose and walked forward with an outstretched hand. Once again the glow of the crystal brightened as he drew closer, reflecting around the room, banishing the shadows that hung in the corners. He reached out and grasped one of the towers to the right side and stepped back. The crystal began emitting that same purple light as it had with Ezra and a sinking feeling grew wildly in my stomach. My suspicions were proven true as bolts of lightning surround him, burrowing themselves within his arms. He cried out in agony as feathered wings black as the night burst from his shoulder blades, similar markings to Ezra’s appearing on his skin.

“NO!” I cried out, collapsing to the ground in tears. *He can’t be, why would fate make us mates just to rip him from me*, I thought, my mind swirling wildly.

Ezra hauled me up, wrapping me in his arms. “Don’t immediately think the worst, Red. You could be Dark Fae, like us. There’s still hope. Hold on to it.” He ran a soothing hand over my back before turning me back around to see Kyllan in his new form.

He stood a foot taller than he had before, his horns ashen gray as opposed to black like Ezra's. Kyllan turned around to look at us, one glance at his eyes told me he knew the fate he'd been saddled with.

"I'm Dark Fae, aren't I?" He asked knowingly.

I opened my mouth to answer but snapped it shut quickly as a sob threatened to escape. I simply shook my head yes in response.

"Hold on to that hope, Red. It's your turn," Ezra said, nudging me forward as Kyllan ambled his way towards us.

"Regardless of what the crystal chooses for us, I won't ever let you go, Asena," Kyllan confessed, wrapping me in his arms. "I love you, nothing could ever change that."

"I love you too Ky," I said simply.

I stilled, butterflies waging a war against my nerves. My mind began swimming with worry. *What if I didn't Awaken as an Elf?* It should have been simple. Climb to the top of those stairs, cross the dais, grasp the crystal and Awaken. It seemed fate decided to muck up that plan, forever the cruel mistress to careful planning. Fate truly was a strange and hollow inconvenience.

My gaze wandered over to the two newly Awakened Dark Fae males standing near the top of the stairs. *Hold on to that hope, Red.* My mind reminded me. *Hope.* That was all that I needed. With a renewed sense of determination I walked across the dais with purpose and grasped the center tower firmly. The hum of the crystal's magic faltered as a tremor ran through the earth beneath my feet and I splayed a hand across several other towers in attempts to regain my balance.

I cast a glance back at Kyllan, the crazed look in his eyes told me he'd felt it too. The crystal's light grew bright once again, reflecting light against the wetness coating the slick stone walls around us. A thick stream of red light wrapped itself around me as I was lifted off the ground below. My eyes opened wide in disbelief as two more thin strands of light slipped around me, one black in color, the other a brilliant white. Flames began burning bright as the red light faded away. The three streams wove together before they wound tighter and tighter around my body and plunged deep into my chest. Warmth spread throughout my body and I curled into myself embracing that ball of fire burning bright within me. Pain and euphoria coated every nerve ending as the crystal's magik ran through me. A searing feeling ran across my body as markings appeared on my skin.

A roar echoed throughout the cavern as I cried out in pain caused by the skin on my back tearing open. Wings. I had wings. *Hope. I needed to keep clinging to that hope. If I couldn't be with my parents, at least I*

*could be with Kyllan.* I closed my eyes as a smile formed at the corners of my lips when I felt a set of horns grow from the top of my head. I pushed the pain aside and clung to hope. I'd been turned into a Dark Fae. Kyllan was my mate and fate wasn't as cruel a mistress as I thought.

I opened my eyes as the crystal lowered me back to the marble floor of the dias, the light from within it dimming back to its original faint glow. My feet faltered under me at the additional weight of my new wings. I whirled and my smile quickly faded as I took in the look of utter disgust blanched across Kyllan's face. That sinking feeling rose within me once again and tears threatened to cloud my vision.

"I'm not Dark Fae, am I?" I stammered out.

Ezra shook his head. "No Red, you're not. It would seem fate was not on your side today, my friends." He spoke solemnly.

I turned from Kyllan, unable to stand the way he was looking at me. My eyes squeezed shut tight and I cast my hands out in front of me, focusing all of my concentration on expelling the magik I'd been gifted. A familiar warmth spread through my veins and I pushed it towards my hands, trying to create *something* with my new gift. My eyes flew open as I felt heat within my palms. *Fire.* I looked down at my hands in horror and I knew my worst fear had come true. Tears erupted from my eyes in waves as a sob escaped me as I noticed the markings of the Dragonians dancing on my skin.

I spun back around to face Kyllan. His face still contorted in a mask of confusion, hurt and anger. I hated myself for what the Crystal turned me into. Hated that we would be separated when we'd only just begun. I tamped down the anger that began to grow within me before I spoke.

"I'm a Dragonian, aren't I?" I asked through gritted teeth, though I knew the answer.

Kyllan still didn't speak, only shook his head in confirmation as Ezra spoke. "Yes Red. You are."

# CHAPTER



# 36

## *Asena*

Yesterday's events still had my head spinning. We'd made it almost halfway back out of the cave and Kyllan still wasn't speaking to me. I could only hope that things would change today. I was angry at his bitterness, he was acting like I had chosen my fate. I sat up and stretched my arms wide above my head, relishing in the euphoric way the muscles in my back released a bit of tension. My boots scuffed the floor as I ambled to my feet. I glanced over at Kyllan's form under the cover of his black feathered wings. A sigh escaped me as I walked over and nudged Ezra awake, who laid beside him. He let out a grunt of discontentment about being woken from his slumber. Glancing up, his cross expression was replaced with one of compassion. He followed my gaze over to Kyllan and he nodded in understanding. I returned to my side the small alcove we'd found in the new set of tunnels that had opened once we'd been awakened.

After a long period of silence and Kyllan looking like he might explode from the anger brewing within him, Ezra attempted to fly down to the floor below, failing spectacularly. He'd leapt off the edge of the dais with such conviction even Kyllan had faith in him and was prepared to sail down himself. That's when Ezra attempted to flap his wings and land but his wings faltered causing him to disappear from sight as he collided with the enchanted water. I was still doubled over with laughter when he'd hauled himself up over the edge looking like a drowned house cat. My laughter ceased when he smirked and reminded me I'd have to take the stairs down. I'd promptly stuck my tongue out at him and turned on my heel to make my descent only to be frozen in place by Kyllan's cold stare burning a hole through me.



It was only when the three of us were standing on the floor below about to set foot through the once flame ridden entrance that another exit was revealed to us. Knowing what lay in wait for us going back the way we came, we elected to take the new route back, hopeful that our exit would be less eventful than our entrance had been. So far our hope held true. There hadn't been any lakes to swim through or tunnels to take. The path thus far had just been one long yawning tunnel, with alcoves here and there along the way. We traveled until the Dark Fae dispelled in with yet another basket filled with canteens, bread, and fruit. This time, they nodded in recognition at Kyllan and Ezra, paying me no mind. I'd decided that must be a silent greeting amongst their kind and wondered what new ways I'd be expected to learn once I reached Vekroth.

I attempted to make a small fire with my newly awoken magik last night. Surprise flowed through me as a small ball of fire formed in my hand, though when I'd attempted to send heat across the alcove to Kyllan and Ezra they screeched in horror as flames raced towards them. I'd quickly rescinded my power, causing the flames to disperse as quickly as they'd come. At least I'd managed to warm up a little.

A grunt sounded from Kyllan's rigid form as he took me in. Apparently he wasn't going to speak to me today either.

"Kyllan, mate. You've got to say something to her. She's got no bloody say in what the Crystal gifted her," Ezra scolded him.

Kyllan didn't answer him. Instead he just simply glared between the two of us and set off down the tunnel. Ezra flashed me a sympathetic half smile before running after him. I sighed and picked up three canteens and set off after them.

"I can't believe you're taking her side in this," Kyllan yelled.

"There aren't any sides here, Kyllan. I don't understand why you're acting this way. You told her you loved her. Start acting like it," Ezra rebutted.

I inched closer, trying my best to move silently. Hopefully Ezra would be able to pry some answers out of Kyllan. He was right, it's not like I asked for this. I'd only wished that the crystal either let me go home or be with Kyllan. Fate is who he should be upset with, just as I was.

"You don't get it do you? On some level she had to *want* this to happen," Kyllan said, an edge cutting through his tone.

"You've absolutely lost it if you think Red wants anything other than to be with you, mate. She's bonkers about you, haven't you seen the

pain splashed across her face when she thinks we aren't looking?" Ezra said in disbelief.

"I have. I'm perfectly aware of her feelings for me," Kyllan said softly.

"Then what's the problem?" Ezra asked plainly.

I cursed under my breath as the sound of my boots shuffling along the floor sounded through the tunnel, alerting them of my presence. Kyllan's head whipped in my direction and I placed my mask of indifference on one more time.

"The Crystal gives you what your soul needs," Kyllan said matter of factly.

I sucked in a short breath of air.

"Please tell me you don't actually believe that? The Crystal gives you what your soul needs." Ezra barked out a laugh.

"It's what my father taught us. Because it is what he was taught by his father, and his father before him," I replied meekly.

"Our parents told Knox and I that growing up as well. Though we always assumed it was a load as they quit saying it after Knox was awakened Dragonian," Ezra explained softly.

I looked at Kyllan apologetically. "It's my fault. I asked the Crystal to let me go home or to stay with you. I should have just thought about staying with you."

His face contorted with confusion and he turned away from us as he contemplated my words. Some of the harshness faded away as he faced us once again.

"Promise me you didn't want...this." He gestured to my wings and horns, trying to hide his disgust.

"I promise," I choked out as tears began welling in my eyes and hope blossomed in my chest.

He rushed over to me and grabbed either side of my head, bringing his lips down to meet mine. Kyllan wielded all of his anger and hurt in lips as he deepened the kiss, turning it into the sweetest form of punishment. His hands slid down my back, resting just below my waist as his tongue slid into my mouth and I moaned at the surprise of the intrusion. I got lost in him as he tightened his grip on me, as if to claim me for himself.

The sound of Ezra clearing his throat filled the air. "I'm just gonna give you two a bit. Come find me when you're done, I'll be waiting up ahead."

Kyllan pulled away just long enough to thank him before returning his lips to mine. His kiss became desperate and demanding the longer we remained ensnared in each other's trance. My hand instinctively found its way to the back of his head, his hair wrapped in my fingers. A low guttural growl ripped from his chest as I tugged lightly on the strands caught in my fist. He trailed kisses down my neck, his tongue licking lightly, flicking and teasing.

I let out a breathy moan as need filled me, radiating from the heat building in my core. His hands moved to my waist as he backed me against the wall. I winced as my wings scraped against the rough stone. Kyllan pulled his head back and flashed me a look of concern.

"I'm fine, keep going," I said breathlessly.

My hands reached for the front of his leathers, untying the loops holding them up hurriedly. His hand caught my chin and tilted it up to face him once more as my hands worked to free him. A gasp caught in my throat as his fingertips grazed the skin under the waistband of my leathers. He smirked at my surprise and kissed my swollen lips once more as he plunged his hand farther into my pants, toying with the scant bit of fabric between his hand and my wetness.

"Will there ever come a day when you aren't this wet for me, Ase?" He asked coyly.

I smirked as he sprung free and I took him in my hand, delivering long slow strokes up and down the length of him. He hissed at the tightness of my grip as I brought my hand down once again from head to hilt. His fingers slipped beneath the thin fabric of my panties and swiped at my wetness, teasing my clit. A breathy moan escaped my lips, echoing in the cavern around us. I kept pumping him as he drove two fingers into me. My grip on him faltered as sheer pleasure overtook my body and I came apart in his hand. His fingers pumping in and out while his thumb worked my clit in the most euphoric form of torture.

"More. Kyllan, I need more," I pleaded, looking at him hungrily.

He withdrew his hand and I ached at the sudden feeling of emptiness. Slowly, he got to his knees and pulled my boots off before sliding my pants to the ground, followed by my panties. He stood and lined himself up at my entrance, easing himself in all the way to the base. His hands reached for the hem of my leather top, hesitating a moment before pulling them away. I began rotating my hips, craving some sort of movement between us, being driven by the need growing within me.

"Greedy girl, aren't you?" He chuckled, pulling out slowly.

I gave him a pouty look and he smirked before grasping hold of my hips and thrusting himself inside me hard. A deep moan rang out around

us as I relished in the pleasure consuming me. He cursed under his breath and his grip tightened as he continued pumping in and out of me, harder and harder with each thrust. His hand slid to my clit once again and he swiped a finger over it in tune with his thrusts. Euphoria overtook my body as I clamped down around him and came apart with a loud roar. My legs began feeling heavy under the weight of my pleasure ridden form. With a hard final thrust Kyllan grunted as his cock pulsed inside me, spilling his own pleasure.

He pulled out and tucked himself away before turning so I could get myself dressed again.

“I’m going to miss that. Being like that with you anyway,” He admitted sheepishly.

I froze with one leg in my pants and looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

Still facing the wall, he rubbed the back of his neck. “Well it’s just, we won’t be able to be this way with one another once we walk out of this cave.”

“Oh. I guess I hadn’t thought about that yet. I know we won’t see each other as often but that doesn’t mean we can’t visit,” I said, pulling my pants up and fastening them once again.

He turned on his heel. “Actually, it does. Soldiers can’t visit the other lands, I would’ve thought your dad would have told you.”

I padded over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Even if we’re vowed to one another?”

Kyllan spun around. “They may make an exception, but we’d need to make sure.”

“If they allow it we could vow to see each other monthly. I know the Brokenstone are allotted one day of rest from training, I can’t imagine it’s different elsewhere,” I called over my shoulder as I went to retrieve my boots and slip them back on.

“If they allow it,” he responded.

I stood with a smile. “Let’s go find Ezra, hopefully he didn’t wander off too far.”

“Let’s hope it was far enough that he was out of earshot,” he replied, a rye smile teasing his lips.

I laughed. “Ky, we’re in a cave. Everything is louder in here because of the echoes.”

“Right,” He admitted, his smile transforming to a sheepish grin.

We didn't have to walk too far before we came across Ezra staring at a deep alcove. Seeing him standing there, an intrigued look upon his face piqued my curiosity. I moved to stand beside him and was taken aback by what lay before my eyes. A small dust covered bedroll was positioned on one side and a foul smelling pot to another. Half eaten food sat rotting on the floor near the pail.

"Was someone..." I paused, "was someone living here?"

Ezra frowned as he turned to me. "It would seem so, though it looks like whoever it was is long gone now."

Kyllan draped an arm around my shoulders as he approached us. "Gross, but best not to think of that now. Just be thankful they're not here for us to have to deal with."

"Thank the Crystal for that." I laughed. "Now let's get out of this bloody cave. I need sunlight on my skin."

"It can't be too much further. We could just keep going until we reach the end today," Ezra suggested, looking eager to be out of the dampness of the subterranean caverns.

We all agreed and set off down the tunnel once more, pushing the thought of the sad homeless alcove from our minds. On and on we walked, stopping only to rest our weary legs and regain our balance. Learning to move with my newly acquired wings was proving to be a challenge. I could only imagine how poorly I'd fare in training. Leaves crunched under my boots and I looked around the cave. The tunnel led us right back to the beginning, where we'd conquered air.

"We're almost there!" I squealed with excitement. "This is where Kyllan and I grabbed hold of vines to make it past air."

"I remember. You two were one of the first through. I only passed you during the tunnel shifting I think," Ezra replied before looking ahead. "Let's go."

We broke out into a run, eager to make our escape. I stumbled a few times, tripping over a vine here and there. Excitement and nerves settled in when sunlight streamed into the cave and the entrance revealed itself to us.

"I promise to write to you both. And Kyllan if they'll allow it, our vow shall be put in place," I said to each of them.

"If they'll allow it, I will uphold it," Kyllan replied, placing a kiss on my cheek.

"I can't promise to write as much as you do but I'll try," Ezra replied. "Just promise you won't abandon me out there."

"Promise," Kyllan and I said in unison.

Hand in hand we took a deep breath and made our exit, the hope of bright futures radiating from all three of us.

# CHAPTER



## 37

### *Ryker*

“I’m still shocked at the amount of vilande that elected to become healers this year,” Knox said, gesturing toward the group seated to the right of the stage where the entirety of the High Council now sat.

I barked out a laugh. “You can’t seriously tell me if you thought for a second you’d have to face a pool of ice or wall of flames you wouldn’t have thought twice about making the same choice.”

He cocked an eyebrow at me as he refilled his chalice with wine. “Would you?”

“Oh we all know he’s not one to turn down a challenge, my love,” Kiira chided as she held her empty chalice up.

Knox shook his head and plucked it from her delicate grasp. I envied the two of them, hell I’d say a lot of the legion did. To find your fated mate was to find true unyielding happiness. It was something each of us searched for, though it would seem fate was stacked against me where my search was concerned. I turned to fill my own chalice as Kallus spoke from the balcony’s edge.

“Well now. It would seem we have our first recruit Ryker,” he said, gesturing toward the cave opening as he drank from his own chalice.

“Let me see!” Knox said, knocking him out of the way. His brown locks bounced with each step as he muscled his way to the front of the balcony to gain a better view. “Oh shit. It’s a female, and is that...is that my brother with her?”

“It would seem so, though strange. I would have thought he’d awoken with the gift of fire,” Kallus commented nonchalantly.

Kiira stood and made her way to Knox. “Your mother’s mother was Dark Fae wasn’t she?”

She slid her arm around his and cast a glance at me then her chalice that Knox had left behind. Sighing, I retrieved her wine and brought it with me as I joined my comrades at the balcony’s edge.

“Thank you,” Kiira said with a nod as I handed her chalice over, returning her attention back to her mate, Knox.

His sharp features were twisted in confusion and anguish as he gazed upon Ezra. He lowered his voice as he spoke, disbelief lining his words. “I... I’m going to need a moment with him tomorrow. Before he leaves for Alynthi. Ryker, can you make that happen?”

I took in his near pained expression and nodded in response. Something that appeared like relief flooded his high cheekbones and sharp jaw as he relaxed a bit, returning his gaze to the scene below.

These events were typically boring, but we were thankful to escape the barracks for a few days. Even more so when we didn’t have to play courtier, a role my father seemed to be insistent that I take on regardless of my position as Commander. I tipped my chalice back and drank deeply from it before turning my attention to the entrance of the cave.

The trio had emerged fully and were standing in the direct sunlight, basking in it. Light glinted off of her deep midnight turquoise wings as she threw her head back and smiled, relishing in the warmth the sun provided. It was only when her head tilted back down and she opened her eyes that I realized who stood there, before the entire kingdom, a newly awakened Dragonian warrior. *Little Wildfire*. My chalice clanked against the stone floor as my body stilled at the realization.

“Everything okay, Ryker?” Kiira asked a little too calmly.

“I know we were counting on Ezra to join the legion but it’ll be alright. I’m sure there will be plenty of new Dragonians emerging,” Knox said solemnly.

I shook my head in response, unable to form a coherent sentence from the thoughts running through my mind. *Mine*. She was mine, and yet something told me that though fire ran through her veins, it was lightning that claimed her heart.

Cheers were still erupting from the balconies surrounding us as father stood to greet her. She smiled at him like she would an old friend as he shook her hand and pointed her in the direction of the allotted seats for the new Dragonians. I watched as Ezra and the blonde male she’d emerged with approached the stage and were greeted by Lady Reyna with open arms. She swept them into a hug before pulling back and



shaking each of their hands then directed them to the section allotted for Dark Fae.

I turned my attention back to where my little wildfire was seated and took in her rumpled state. Her crimson hair was disheveled and pieces clung to her forehead. Her dark brown and emerald leathers were scuffed and dirt ridden, though I supposed that didn't matter. She'd be receiving new ones upon her arrival to the barracks. One of the first things I'd set out to do as commander was work personally with Selke, the Legions' armor and weapons master, to create a set of enchanted leathers that would protect us during battle but also accommodate our wings. The vest-like leathers we'd adorned under Elijah's command simply would not do any longer.

My gaze caught on her dark teal wings once again. She'd been beautiful before, but now, now I didn't know that a word existed to describe the way I saw her. Even in her ruffled state she was downright breathtaking, despite the anxious expression she wore beneath her pained smile. She was no doubt contemplating why fate had chosen this course for her. Wondering why she was not like her father and mother. Asking herself why she was Dragonian instead of Elven. Yet her eyes scanned the crowd across from her, searching desperately for someone. Her spine stiffened when her gaze found its mark, a half smile forming on her face before she fell still once more. Curiosity got the better of me and I followed her stare across the arena to find Commander Montalli and his wife. Elora wore an expression of indifference while the Commander was clearly trying to tamp down his rage and disappointment. My gaze trickled back to Asena just in time to see her wings shutter and her face fall.

An innate need to go to her, to comfort her tugged at my conscience. My wings shuttered out at the thought before I could regain control of my own actions. As much as it pained me to see her sitting there, breaking at the disappointment cast upon her, I had to tear myself away from it. I reached down and scooped my chalice off the dusty stone floor and walked back to the table to refill it once more.

Over the next day we watched as vakna after vakna emerged from the cave. In total there were fifteen new Dragonian soldiers that solidified their place in our ranks. I'm sure that more were Awakened but hadn't yet made it out of the cave. Kirra, Knox, Kallus and I had decided that those who remained in the cave would have to go through a basic skill set after balance training to determine if they would join the legion or be sent to work in one of the shops in town. At that time, we would hold rank promotions. Maybe then I could get Eirian off my case. She'd been positively terse with me since my announcement last week.

Lightning cracked across the clear sky, signaling the end of The Awakening. I stood once again, taking my place at the balcony's edge, awaiting my cue to float down and greet my new soldiers. Lady Reyna threw a glance to her soldiers and they began dispelling to retrieve those still in the cave. They reappeared as quickly as they'd gone, some escorting a select few to join those that decided not to participate. I counted as new sets of dragonian wings appeared below. Thirteen. Not as many as I'd hoped but it would have to do. Twenty-Eight new soldiers in total. I could only pray to the crystal that the additional thirteen would perform well during training.

"My lords and ladies this concludes the three hundredth Awakening Ceremony," Lady Reyna's voice rang out. "Participants, you will have one day's time to return home and collect your belongings before you are expected in your new posts. The vilande that remain will meet one of the High Priestesses in the capital of your home realm, at the castle. From there you will travel to the Isle of Light and begin your training as healers and historians. To those who have received their gifts, congratulations!" She paused as cheers and applause exploded from the parents and other vakna in attendance.

"Those of you who are remaining in your home realm, you too will meet your Commander, or one of their captains, at the castle. Everyone else, please meet with your Commander to receive a flare, simply deploy it when you are ready to depart. Any vakna that does not deploy their flare will be considered an enemy of the realm. I do not need to remind you that travel between the realms without proper consent is outlawed." Her voice turned solemn as she spoke.

Murmurs broke out amongst the new Vakna as they glanced between themselves and the crowd across from them. I'd always hated that law. Though with the unrest in the early days of the realms becoming divided I understood it. Even now over two hundred years later, there was still discourse between many members of the High Council. They simply put on pleasantries when they were in the presence of others, knowing one wrong statement would send the kingdom back into upheaval.

I cast a glance at Knox, signaling him to follow after me as my wings shuddered out and I dove from the balcony to the arena below. Gasps sounded around me and I chuckled at their surprise, relishing in it. My feet grazed the hard slab of stone earth as I landed softly in front of the newly awakened Dark Fae.

"Ezra, come here," I ordered just before Knox landed silently behind me.

Ezra stood awkwardly, almost tumbling over with the added weight of his wings. I frowned and made a mental note to make sure Lysa covered balance before combat training with him.

“I...I’m sorry Ryker. You don’t know how badly I wanted to... I’m just sorry,” he spoke, shame woven through his words.

“No need to be sorry. I’m so incredibly proud of you for making it out of that cave. If those trials were half as trying as Ryker explained it’s a miracle anyone made it out,” Knox said as he walked towards us.

Relief flooded Ezra’s features as he loosed a breath. “Can you go ahead of me and let the family know? I don’t want to surprise them by just showing up like this.” He gestured to his new form. “If Ryker and Lord Elias are okay with it, that is.”

“Of course it is. Knox go ahead, I’ll let the others know you will meet them at home. I should probably send Kiira back to the barracks to make sure it’s still standing. Ezra, if you have any troubles, let me know,” I said with a nod before turning to walk away.

“I will,” he replied. “I’m thankful I met up with Asena and Kyllan, at least I’ll know someone else that didn’t get the fate they wanted.”

Wouldn’t you know, he finally has a name. “Well thank the Crystal for that,” I replied sardonically. “Still, if you run into any trouble, send word.”

I returned my attention forward and set off toward the newly awakened Dragonians. Kiira was already there speaking with them as Kallus handed out the brilliant red flares to all of them. Kiira turned her attention to me as I approached.

“Can you dispel back to the barracks and make sure they haven’t set the place on fire yet?” I laughed.

She nodded. “Probably not a bad idea. I’ll leave you to it, shall I take Knox?”

“No. He’s got something to take care of. He’ll meet us back at the barracks,” I replied quickly.

She gave me a knowing smile then turned her attention to the loan redhead amongst the sea of wings before us. Her eyes flicked between us and she cocked an eyebrow at me.

“Not here,” I warned. She may be my second but sometimes I swear that female pushed her luck.

“Fine. But we *will* be talking about this, don’t think I’m letting you off the hook.” Kiira said before dispelling.

I loosed a breath and turned back to the new Dragonians that would be arriving at the barracks tomorrow. Kallus nodded at me just as he handed the last flare out. We’d brought more than enough for each of them to have one. I’d decided that we would retrieve each of them

along with a trunk of their belongings. To hell with making them trudge to the castles.

“Dragonians!” My voice rang out. “You have one day’s time to collect your belongings and activate the flare in your hand. Please use this time to say your goodbyes, this is the last time a lot of you will see your families for some time. There will be no exceptions.”

My gaze slid to Asena as those last words left my lips. She needed to know her hurt would be righted, that her parents’ disappointment could not reach her in Vekroth. Though her face fell as it registered that she wouldn’t be seeing them.

“Dismissed,” I said flatly.

She sat there for a bit as the others around her dispersed, off to find their parents and return home. I watched her curiously as she bit her bottom lip and picked at her fingernails. Was she still so apprehensive around me that my being here was setting her on edge? I turned to walk away when I heard her stumble. I rushed to her and caught the crook of her arm to right her balance once more.

“You’ll get used to them. It takes a bit but that’s one of the first things we’ll cover in training.” I said softly.

“Thank you,” she said timidly, turning to face me as she brushed herself off. “Ryker, can I ask a favor?”

Crystal have mercy. The sound of my name on her lips was enough to bring me to my knees. This little wildfire would be my undoing and I couldn’t be bothered to give half a damn to stop it.

“What can I do for you, Little Wildfire?” I asked with a smirk.

She scowled at my use of the nickname I’d given her, but swallowed it down anyway. *Good girl.*

“Well, it’s just...” She began. “Kyllan and I have a vow between us, one that requires we stay in each other’s lives.”

“Go on,” I gritted out, my jaw tensing involuntarily.

She looked at me nervously before blurting out, “would it be possible for him to visit once a month, to satisfy our vow?”

I ran a hand over my face and rubbed at my harsh jawline. Something akin to rage threatened to erupt from within me. Was she really standing here asking for my blessing to see the male that I wanted to set fire to for so much as looking at her? I was actually surprised at her audacity. My gaze caught on the copper cuff that clung to her wrist and I considered it. Having that fucking male visit would be absolute torture, but if it made her happy I would do it. I’d have to make sure I was away when he dispelled in. Kiira is going to kill me for this one, if the

beautiful creature standing before me isn't the cause of my downfall first.

“Yes,” I said as my jaw ticked.

I looked down at her, searching between her eyes as the realization set in and she smiled. She'd won. I'd given in to her wants, and something deep within me told me I always would. That thought petrified me.

# CHAPTER



## 38

### *Asena*

Father was absolutely wrought with anger at the Crystal. He couldn't understand why I wasn't made to be like him and mother. Why I had to return to the distant realm that mother came from. Mother on the other hand seemed nervous about my new path. Neither of them spoke a word to me when we arrived home last night and time was running out to say our goodbyes.

The brilliant red light of the flare winked at me across the room where it sat atop my dresser. Next to it sat a black box that seemed to have appeared overnight. I sat up and stretched, taking pleasure at the release of tension in my shoulders. My new wings were quite heavy and I'd need to work hard to build enough muscle there to have the strength to hold them up. Something told me I'd need to keep them off the ground. I wasn't sure why, but I had a feeling I'd soon find out.

I slinked out of bed and over to the dresser, a chill kissed the flesh of my wings sending a shiver through me. Hopefully I'd learn to control heat soon, the way Ryker did. I plucked the lid off the box and peered inside. A squeal of excitement escaped me as I took in its contents. Black fabric gazed back at me and I pulled it out to see what I'd been sent. The fabric unfolded to reveal some sort of backless top with red stitching along the edges. I sat it down next to the box and pulled out the next item, a pair of thick black lined nylon pants. They two were trimmed with red stitching. A smile stretched across my face as joy took hold of me. I'd be able to

shower and change out of these dusty torn leathers. With nothing in my wardrobe to accommodate my wings, I had resorted to sleeping in my dirt ridden state.

I moved to snatch the top when I saw the note lying in the bottom of the box. I reached in and read the words scrawled on the bit of parchment.

*Welcome home, little wolf. I hope these are to your liking.*

*-M*

Who was M and what did they mean welcome home? Perhaps it was one of mothers relatives, though I wouldn't know. She never spoke of them, but I knew they kept in contact by the string of dragon letters she received over the years. I sat the note aside and grabbed the outfit once more heading to the bathroom to shower and ready for my departure. I'd taken advantage of the quiet last night and packed everything then.

I quickly showered and tugged the new clothing on. The pants fit snug against my skin, hugging every inch of it. The top had been a bit awkward to get into as I'd had to step into it and then sort of bend to get my head in the allotted hole. Though I was thankful to know such a style existed, and silently wondered if a version with longer sleeves was available for the winter months. I slid on my boots, grabbed the flare, and ventured downstairs, losing my balance only once on the way down. My wings grazed the walls as I walked down the hall and I fought to keep them tucked in. Hushed voices met my ears as I neared the kitchen.

"..awaiting word from Elias about visiting regularly to ensure her safety," Father said.

"She'll be fine, Roarke. We just need to keep her blissfully unaware of her heritage. I know we'd hoped she'd remain here where we could keep an eye on her but you know how the Crystal's magik works. It's unpredictable. It follows fate."

Why would I need to remain unaware of my heritage? I enhanced the sound of my footfalls to let them know I was approaching. Apparently this was a conversation they felt I didn't need to hear and frankly I was upset with them for hiding my lineage from me. I rounded the corner into the kitchen and was met with father's sleep ridden face and mother's puffy eyes. They'd clearly had a rough night as well.

I strode over to the cupboard and pulled down a mug, placed a cube of sugar inside and poured the lavender tea from the kettle that sat on the stovetop.

“I see you found the box that was sent for you,” Mother cooed from her seat at the table.

“I did. Thank you,” I chirped before drinking deeply from my cup.

Father rose from his seat and strode over to me. “Asena, you should know I’ve sent word to Elias, asking permission to visit.”

“Why?” I asked, wondering if they’d tell me the truth.

He glanced at mother and then back at me. “We just want to ensure you’re settling in okay, and that you’re safe.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s not like there’s something you’re keeping from me that would warrant my endangerment, say my heritage for example. Besides, if you two are so keen on coming to visit then there’s no need for goodbyes,” I said knowingly.

If they wanted to keep things from me I didn’t need to say anything more to them. I sat my cup down and began to walk out of the kitchen when mother caught my arm.

“Little wolf,” she pleaded. “Please don’t leave in anger. Yes, there are things we haven’t told you but we have done so to ensure your safety.”

“When will you two realize I am not a child any longer? You’re both so concerned with my safety you haven’t stopped to realize the divide this is causing between us,” I roared, unable to hold in my frustrations any longer.

Father’s face reddened as he pushed off the counter and rounded the table heading straight for me. But I held my ground, I would not falter.

“You will do well to remember you may not be a child but you are still under our roof. We will tell you when we think it’s best, we are only trying to ensure your safety” he said tersely, pointing a finger in my face.

I slapped his hand away. “Far be it from me to keep you from what you think is best,” I bellowed, anger flaring within me.

I turned on my heel and stalked from the house. The flare grew heavy in my hand as I pulled it from my pocket. I went to smash it against the ground when I heard the door open behind me.



Frustrated, I set off down the road toward the meadow. I'd wait for my pickup there.

Wildflowers grew along the path in droves as I grew closer to the meadow. I ducked beneath a branch and entered between the rows of violets and daisies that Mother had planted there just last week. Strange to think how much had changed in that short time span. Though I supposed things would continue to change drastically for me in the coming days.

The flare exploded in a brilliant flash of red light as I crushed it beneath my boot against the soft grass below. I took one last look around the meadow and said goodbye to one of my favorite places in Herbexia. I'd miss coming here with Kyllan or stretching out with a good book while the breeze blew against the pages.

A twig snapped behind me and I spun on my heel falling into one of the defensive positions Bria taught me. My gaze landed upon a roguish looking female with crimson hair and wings. Her ashen horns twisted back as they rose from atop her head. She smirked at me and the way I'd fallen into position so quickly.

"I'm not here to harm you, Red," she said. "My name is Kiira. I am one of the captains of The Crimson Legion and Ryker's second in command."

She was his second? But she looked so *small*. Though I supposed she most likely made up for it in her determination on the battlefield. Something told me I didn't want to be fighting opposite her.

"Hello. My name is Asena. It's nice to see that Ryker values female warriors just as much as his males," I said with a smile. "Though I'm shocked he didn't spell my flare to alert him when I'd activated it."

She barked a laugh. "Oh he tried, but Knox and Kallus distracted him while I swapped it out. And as you're our only recruit from Herbexia, I've been watching the flare locations like a hawk. Poor sap is probably still waiting on your flare to alert him."

I burst into a fit of laughter. "He does seem to be rather *interested* in me. Though I'm not sure why. I am thankful that he agreed to let Kyllan visit monthly to honor our vow."

Her face fell. Clearly she hadn't known about that and I could only hope that I hadn't fucked up by saying that.

"Yes, he is quite generous," she said softly.

Kiira took in our surroundings as I stood there awkwardly trying to come up with something to say. The weight of the silence between us became increasingly unbearable.

“Red. Where are we? Clearly you don’t live here,” she asked, gesturing around the meadow.

I let out a nervous laugh. “Ah yes, this would be the meadow. I left all of my belongings back home, but I frankly don’t much care to go back and get them. It would seem my parents have been hiding my lineage from me for some stupid fucking reason. They claim it’s to keep me safe whatever the hell that means.”

“So you just left?” She asked, cocking an eyebrow at me as she crossed her arms.

“Yep. Though not that it matters. My father sent word to Elias requesting regular visitation. I have half a mind to ask Ryker if he can get his father to decline that request. I don’t exactly want my parents coming to visit whenever they want. I don’t want any special treatment just because I’m the daughter of another Commander,” I stated, matter of factly.

“You know, I think you’ll fare quite well in Vekroth.” She smiled at me and extended her hand. “Shall we take our leave then?”

I cast one last glance around the meadow, saying my silent goodbyes. I took a step toward her and grasped her hand. The air around us constricted and contracted as the wildflower filled meadow faded away and a mountain peak appeared above us.

“Welcome to your new home, Red,” Kiira chirped as we landed softly on the harsh ground below.

Awestruck, I took in my surroundings. This didn’t look like Soleia at all. All the pictures I’d seen of the capital showed the mountain that we seemed to be on the side of off in the distance. The legion’s training camp must be nestled high above the city. A tall gate loomed ahead of us, that must be the way in.

“Where are we exactly?” I asked meekly.

“This is the entrance to the Crimson Legion training grounds. Only those with the ability to control fire can gain entrance. You simply need to send a spurt of fire at the dragon symbol in the center of the gate to open them,” she explained with a twinkle in her eye. “Why don’t you give it a try? Go on and step up there, simply cast your arm out and focus on the fire within you.”

I did as she instructed and stepped directly inline with the dragon symbol in the center of the gate. I lifted an outstretched hand and focused on the fire humming within my veins.

“Good. Now focus that energy on the dragon symbol,” she coached.

Once again I did as she told me, focusing all of my energy on the dragon symbol. Flames burst from my palm and hit the symbol. A loud click sounded and the gate swung open, as if to welcome us inside.

“Amazing work. Now let’s go get you fitted for new leathers and find your lodging,” she said as she set off through the gates.

I hurried behind her, not wanting to be stuck outside the gates after they swung closed again.

“Thank you. For coming to get me I mean, and for letting me try my hand at entering the gate,” I said once I’d caught up to her again.

She smiled in response then gestured at my attire. “Nice jumpsuit. Though I’m surprised to see you in something that was acquired in one of the shops here. Did you expect to be awakened as a Dragonian?”

“No,” I said with a frown. “Quite the opposite actually. It’s by sheer luck that I’m not still in my torn leathers from the awakening. Apparently a relative of mine lives here and sent these at some point after I’d emerged from the cave.”

“That’s nice. Maybe you’ll be able to suss out your lineage while you’re here. Ryker gives the units one and half days rest. Though in the beginning you’ll train three days on, two days off. The legions training is tough, we don’t want to overexert anyone before they’ve gone through The Ascension,” she explained.

I cast an incredulous look at her as she further explained the training schedule, and what I should come to expect in my first weeks here while we continued walking through the grounds. We walked past a row of cabins then, she ducked inside a large rectangular building located on the northern side of the grounds. I followed her inside and found an expansive selection of weapons and armor. The thought of wielding a bow again elated me. Though I suspected that’s not why we were here, I highly doubted they were going to weaponize new recruits before we got our bearings.

“Ah, Kiira. I take it this is one of our new recruits,” a lithe female said as she flitted towards us.

“Yes, Selke. This is Asena Montalli, am I to assume none of the others have arrived with their charges yet?” Kiira responded.

Selke’s eyes widened. “Montalli? As in Commander Montalli?”

“That would be my father. Though I hope I’m not granted any special treatment because of it. I’d really rather just be given the same as the others,” I said honestly.

“Of course dear. Now let’s get you ready for training tomorrow hmm?” Selke cooed.

Her long silken blonde locks swished back and forth across her narrow shoulders between her silver wings as she sauntered across the room to a curious looking bench. It was made of some sort of metal with thick twisted legs and an expansive top. Several empty dragon pendants were strewn across the top and next to them lay a pile of glowing red gems. Selke slid behind the bench and grabbed one of the gems.

Looking up at me she asked, “Do you prefer the black or the silver dragon?”

I looked to where she gestured on the bench. “Hmm, I think I’ll take the black.”

She nodded in understanding and began working, manipulating the metal of the empty pendant so that the stone she’d selected could easily fit inside. She held it up to the light, muttered something under her breath and placed it back down on the bench once more. She used a set of small peculiar looking instruments to meticulously adjust the stone so it sat flush inside the pendant.

“That ought to do the trick,” she said proudly, holding up the pendant in her hand, gesturing for me to take it.

“Well, let’s try it on, shall we, Red?” Kiira suggested. “We will need to make sure it’s a good fit before heading to your quarters.”

I cast her a confused glance. “Why wouldn’t a pendant be a good fit?”

“This is a *bit* more than just a pendant. Best to show you what I mean,” Kiira responded.

She took the pendant from Selke and positioned herself behind me. Her hands made quick work of removing my malachite wolf necklace and replacing it with the dragon one Selke designed.

“Place this in your pocket. You may of course keep it, though you will find it is easier to control your magik with the proper crystal

adorning your body,” she said, her voice came out low and caring.

I quickly placed the pendant in my pocket as she instructed. Though I was still confused in regard to the one that hung where my wolf did just moments ago. *It sure seemed like just a pendant. What was so special about it?* I thought to myself.

“Your pendant controls your armor. Ryker worked with Selke and a few of the High Priestesses to create this for the legion. Provided it fits properly, you’ll find it’s like wearing a second layer of skin. The armor has two settings, training and battle. Your training armor is a bit thinner than your battle armor,” she explained.

“But...how? It looks like a regular necklace,” I asked curiously.

She chuckled and cast a glance at Selke who explained further.

“To activate your armor you only need to press the garnet once. This will coat your body in your training leathers, pressing it twice will activate your battle armor.” Selke explained excitedly, her green eyes twinkling with each word.

“Well go on girl, give it a try,” Kiira urged.

With a hesitant hand, I pressed the red glowing stone centered in the small pendant that rested just below the hollow of my neck. I watched in awe as the glow from the garnet seemed to spread, transforming into a leather as black as the darkest night as it roved over my skin. It was just as Kiira described it, like wearing a second layer of skin. The leathers were the most comfortable thing I’d ever worn, I practically wanted to live in them, though I assumed that would be frowned upon.

“How does it fit dear?” Selke cooed.

I smiled wickedly back at her. “Like a glove. This is amazing Selke, thank you.”

Selke clasped her hands together and circled me, inspecting her work with pride.

“Yes, I think that will do nicely. Now, press the stone once more to change to your battle armor please. I’ll need to make sure the plates lie against your form correctly,” she instructed.

Once again I brought a hand up to the stone, pressing it firmly. The glow that escaped the stone was more vivid than it had been before. I felt the leather grow thicker as the glow traveled from my shoulders to my feet. Silver edged black metallic scales adorned the armored top and continued down stopping just short of the solid

black armored flaps that clung to my hips. Thick leather coated the tops of my forearms and shoulders and straps had formed around my right thigh, as if awaiting a holster to be attached.

A low whistle escaped from Kiira. “Looking sharp. How’s it fit?”

“Definitely a bit heavier than the training leather but it still fits rather nice,” I replied. “Though is there a mirror? I’m a bit curious how all of this black looks against my fair skin.”

“Just over here dear. Follow me,” Selke called, setting off toward the back of the shop. “I moved them back here after we created the new armor successfully. Each of Ryker’s soldiers has stood in front of them, now it is your turn. Bit of a tradition in the legion really.”

Not even here half a day and I’m already participating in traditions within my legion. *Maybe this won’t be so bad after all.*

“Ah yes, here we are. Just go on and stand there, You’ll be able to see yourself from all sides.” Selke guided me, pointing to a small platform in the center of the room surrounded by elongated mirrors.

I hesitantly stepped onto the platform and closed my eyes. This would be the first time I’d seen myself in my new form and I could only hope it was better than what I was imagining. Short of my dark turquoise wings, I had no idea what I looked like. I took a deep breath and opened my eyes.

Wrong. The girl in the reflection staring back at me couldn’t be the same one that entered the cave. This girl looked harsh and unforgiving. My black horns twisted and curved back just slightly. Though my wings were quite beautiful they felt *foreign* as I looked at myself with them. I could see why Ryker wanted to change the armor. *I looked like a nightmare.* A single tear slid down my cheek and I felt a hand grasp hold of mine.

“Come on Red, let’s get you to your lodging. You’ll need your rest for tomorrow,” Kiira said quietly, pulling me from the room.

I pressed the stone once more and my armor disappeared just as quickly as it’d formed before. The longer I was out of the building and away from the haunting image of my reflection, the more I started to feel like myself again.

# CHAPTER



## 39

### *Asena*

*“Wait here, I’ll be right back. I just need to fetch something for you from the training shed,” He said, his blue eyes full of hope and happiness.*

*He turned and walked off towards the circular cabin at the center of the grounds, just off the edge of the training ring. His wings were on display as I watched him disappear beyond the door to the small shed. I hopped up from where I sat on the small stone wall and began practicing my stances.*

*Footsteps sounded behind me and I whirled around expecting to see him only to be met with two hooded figures. NO! It couldn’t be, this isn’t happening. Darkness descended upon me and terror shot through me straight to my core. Fear threatened to immobilize me as I began to run. Get to him, he can save you. I thought to myself.*

*A high pitched laugh sounded beside me as the more slender of the two figures latched onto me, dragging me away from the arena. I broke free from their grasp and ran, smacking into a wall of nothingness. Turning I ran again and again and again, all to no avail.*

*“I’m going to get my retribution, and you, little wolf are the key.” The taller figure spoke as they began to pull back their hood to reveal Kiira and I stumbled backward in shock.*

*“You’re finally mine. I always knew I’d have you,” a low voice growled behind me.*

*The second figure pulled their hood back and I gasped as Ryker stared back at me. How could that be? He’d just gone into the training shed. I didn’t have time to process that thought as the familiarity of the*

*training grounds disappeared and I found myself in a dank poorly lit cellar. Chains hung from the wall beside me and rows of cells lined the back wall.*

*“Secure her in place. We don’t need this one getting loose,” Ryker barked at Kiira.*

*She glided on shadows over to me and placed the thick metal cuffs around my wrists. I thrashed and tried to fight her off but it was to no avail. The cuffs seemed to be blocking my magik somehow. I let out a wail of desperation, hoping someone would hear me. Kiira seemed to wield the shadows that surrounded her and Ryker as she raised a hand, throwing them at me, knocking me out to stop my screams. I free fell into the blackness she’d cast me in. Trapped there, with only a silent prayer that someone would pull me out.*

“Little Wildfire. Come back to me,” Ryker’s voice whispered sweetly as he stroked my cheek. “It’s just a dream, you’re safe here.”

Sweat coated my body as heat continued to pour from me. Fear had overtaken my magik while I slept and I was lucky I hadn’t set the cabin on fire.

“Asena, you need to calm down. Pull your magik back in,” he said, his voice louder, command lacing his tone.

I bolted upright and threw him off of me. Another wave of heat burst from me, my magik heightened by the fear running through me.

“Get away from me!” I screamed at him. “I know what you’re trying to do. I won’t let you take me.”

He pulled himself to his feet, turned the light on, and walked across the small bedroom of the cabin to sit on the plush red chair and stare at me. Confusion and hurt flashed across his face as he considered his words.

“Asena you need to know that what you see in your night visions isn’t real. I would never take you, I would never harm you,” he said calmly.

“I don’t believe you,” I replied quietly, adjusting my position in bed so that I was sitting up with the cover pulled round my waist. .

Ryker hung his head in defeat and clasped his hands over the back of his neck. I watched him hesitantly as he sat there. Ready myself for the fight that was inevitably coming. But it didn’t. Instead he just dropped his hands, clasping them together in front of him as he looked up at me.

“I’ll vow it to you. The Mother can have me if I break it,” he whispered, almost too quietly.



My eyebrows shot up and I was taken aback. “Why would you do that?”

“I told you. I’ll never harm you, Little Wildfire, not intentionally. You are too precious a thing in this world. So if my vowing it to you will make you more comfortable here then I shall do it,” he stated plainly as if it was that simple for him.

That innate pull to him was coming back, begging me to trust him. To let him vow this to me though every fiber of my being was telling me to run.

“Okay,” I replied hesitantly.

“I’ll visit Selke and get cuffs made for us tomorrow. You’ll need to wear this one on your left wrist, opposite your other one.” He gestured towards the cuff on my right wrist.

“Can it be black?” I asked curiously. “The cuff I mean. I’d like it to match my pendant and my armor as well, if that’s possible.”

“Whatever you’d like,” he chuckled. “I’ll bring the final design by tomorrow after training, provided you are comfortable with that.”

I nodded my head yes. It felt like trust was blossoming between us, even without the vow securely in place. Although that otherworldly pull was telling me that I would be safe with him, I felt myself subconsciously fighting it.

“Very well. Now try to get some rest, it’s quite late.” He said before he pushed to his feet and strode across the room to the door, pausing to look back at me. “Will you be okay on your own?”

“Don’t really have much of an option but to be now do I?” I retorted.

“Goodnight, Little Wildfire,” he said solemnly, turning on his heel and disappearing from the room.

It was only after I heard the click of the front door latch shut that I got out of bed. I rushed to the door and refastened the lock. Even with Ryker’s promise of a vow, I was still on edge after that night vision. It seemed all too real. I padded down the short hall to the small kitchen and poured myself a glass of cool water. If I expected to get any sort of sleep tonight I needed to calm down and reel my magik back in. After I’d double checked the door and ensured it was still firmly locked, I ventured back to the quaint bedroom. The brass frame of the double bed groaned as I collapsed into it once more. I layed there and stared at the ceiling, counting the nails in each wooden board until I fell into sleep’s warm embrace once more.

A loud banging ripped me from a deep sleep. *What the fuck is that?* It definitely wasn’t in the cabin with me. It sounded again and I realized it

was coming from outside, accompanied by a somewhat muffled voice. The sound grew louder as they came closer to my cabin. Mother above, *please* tell me this isn't how they wake up the legion. With the little amount of sleep I got last night I was sure to perform pitifully on my first day here. *Great*.

“Breakfast time cadets!” A deep male voice sounded between the banging.

The banging grew closer and I recognized it, a battle drum. And it looks like this will be a daily occurrence. *Lovely*. Let's hope sleep wouldn't continue to elude me in the coming nights. The metal bed frame creaked as I sat up. I pushed myself off the bed to my feet, swaying slightly before gaining my footing. *Fucking wings*.

I walked over to the small bureau and opened the top drawer. Inside I found several tops similar to the one I'd found in the black box at home. These were the same basic design but the material was thinner, more flexible. I tossed one of the shirts on the bed and opened the drawer below it. This time I found pants, made of the same material as the top that now lie on the bed. I closed the drawer and quickly dressed in the clothes I'd been provided. My feet slid into the dark brown boots, and I made quick work of the laces.

The other females here seemed to wear their hair loose, but I had no such desire. I didn't want it in my face, but I didn't want to stand out from the other females by wearing it up either. I made quick work of my hair, running my fingers through it roughly until it was tame enough that I could fold it into a quick braid. I chanced a quick look in the mirror before heading out for the day. Satisfied, I made for the door.

A knock sounded as I reached for the doorknob. Who was here so early? I cracked the door expecting to see Ryker or Kiira, but was met with a tall unfamiliar male instead. His shoulders were broad and his chest expansive, much more so than most other males I'd seen. I took in the rest of his muscular form as I swung the door open to greet him. His square jaw was set in determination, peppered with thick silver stubble.

“Asena Montalli?” His voice questioned in a low tenor, I recognized it as the same one that accompanied the drum earlier. *Rude ass*.

“Who's asking?” I asked with feigned confidence, putting on a mask of bravery.

His emerald eyes bore into me in annoyance, giving me a once over. He shook his head and chuckled to himself.

“The Commander wanted me to show you to the Cafeteria, seeing as you didn't get the full tour yesterday and are a transplant,” the male replied.

I cast him a curious look. “What does me being from Herbexia have to do with anything?”

“Apologies. I guess I should explain,” he said, his voice genuine. He paused momentarily before continuing. “On their last day, the vilande that attend Sunniva Academy come and tour the grounds here.”

“Ah,” I said simply.

He turned on his heel and set off towards another row of cabins.

“Come on then, if you want anything decent, best to get there early,” he called over his shoulder. “And I’d go ahead and get into your leathers, unless you want the extra attention from wandering eyes. Though, I doubt any of the other captains want to break up a brawl this early.”

I laughed nervously and reached a hand up to the stone seated in the pendant round my neck, pressing it once firmly. The leather slid across my body like silk as we walked, Mother above I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that. We walked past rows and rows of cabins towards a tall round building encased in glass, though I couldn’t see inside.

“So does my tour guide have a name or....?” I asked with a smirk.

He chuckled to himself. “Kallus. And I can see what Ryker meant. You’re sure to keep us on our toes aren’t you, Red?”

I frowned at the nickname, remembering Ezra and our time in the cave. *I wonder how he’s fairing*, I thought to myself.

“Why does everyone seem to call me that?” I asked, unable to contain my curiosity.

“Red? It’s the hair, it’s not very common in Vekroth, hasn’t been since King Ravi left. Kiira is the only Dragonian with Scarlett hair and that’s due to her using that awful concoction to dye it that way,” Kallus explained.

*That explains that I guess.* Kallus flung the doors of the cafeteria open and I followed him inside. It was stunning. Orbs of firelight hung throughout the space, though in the daytime they weren’t needed. Sunlight poured through the windows that surrounded us, spanning from the floor all the way up to the domed ceiling.

The smell of sausage, bacon and eggs wafted towards me, beckoning me towards it. My mouth watered at the thought of real food. I’d only eaten small bits of fruit, cheese and bread for the past week and I was absolutely craving a full meal with meat and vegetables. Though I’d counted on such a meal when I arrived home, the silence from my parents was too much to bear and I simply grabbed a bit of bread and cheese before traipsing off to bed. Yesterday, well there simply hadn’t

been time, though I did find a tray of grapes and cheeses outside of my door before bedtime last night. A sinking feeling told me the culprit behind that tray was the same one that sent Kallus to my door this morning.

“Go on Red. I’ll catch up with you after breakfast, then we’ll walk up to the training grounds with the other cadets and captains,” Kallus instructed before turning and heading towards an elongated table that sat at the center of the room.

My gaze followed his emerald wings as he took his seat next to a familiar face, Kiira, and another rather muscular male with brown hair and wings the color of a moonlit sky. A smile hinted at my lips as I watched the trio laugh and joke, *perhaps friendship was possible here*.

A low growl sounded from my stomach turning my attention back to the meal being served at the front of the room. The line had grown significantly since we first entered and I found myself suddenly thankful for my rather rude wake up this morning. I trudged over to the back of the line and stood there, begrudgingly waiting my turn.

“Fuck. The breakfast line is always the worst,” a soft female voice said behind me.

I peaked over my shoulder to see a set of violet wings and tall, twisted black horns belonging to an ashen haired female that had her back to me. She turned back around to face toward the front of the line and caught my stare.

“How long you been here, Red?” She asked curiously, gesturing towards the rest of the line with a jerk of her chin.

“Not very long I’m afraid,” I replied.

She stood on her toes, trying to assess the line ahead of us and sighed. “At least it’s not too long. Should be plenty of time to grab food and have time to eat before they start rounding the cadets up like cattle for training. Though I supposed you’ll figure that out soon enough. I’m Eirian by the way, I’ll be in your training unit with you until Ryker decides to do fucking rank promotions.”

I assessed her with cautious eyes, the last female I’d met during training hadn’t been kind, I really didn’t want to deal with that shit again. She cast me a friendly smile that reached her silver flecked eyes and held out her hand as a way of greeting. I took it firmly in my hand and returned her smile.

“Asena, and as you’ve probably guessed, I’m not really from here. Though, I guess I am now,” I chuckled in spite of the dull ache I felt in my chest for home.

We moved through the line, telling each other tales of our adventures in Vekroth and Herbexia. I told her about Kyllan and my time in the cave. She told me about her Awakening, and though it was far less eventful than mine, it was no less exciting. Apparently a group of vilande tried to sabotage her and a male named Garreth. They sent them through the wrong set of tunnels and the pair almost didn't make it out of the cave in time because of it. I divulged my encounter with Jonah and his group of friends just as we grabbed two biscuits each and turned to face the room.

I followed Eirian as she made her way over to a small rectangular table just a few feet from the captains table in the center of the room. She swung her legs over the bench and sat down in one fluid motion. Though when I attempted to do the same, I stumbled back slightly and had to regain my balance.

"You almost had it!" She encouraged. "Until you get a better grasp on your balance, try holding the edge of the table for support as you shift your weight. It takes a few weeks to get truly acclimated to having them, but after a couple of days your balance kind of sorts itself out."

*I had noticed moving about seemed easier today.* I thought to myself.

"Thank you. It's been *difficult* to say the least," I chirped, taking my place across from her, bracing myself by gripping the edge of the table as she'd suggested.

"Oh I remember. I've only been awakened one year now. I'm just thankful that our now Commander and his captains took me and a few others under their wing so to speak. I had so much trouble adjusting and Ryker actually offered to give me additional training during our off times at night," Eirian stated as she took a big bite of bacon.

*Huh.* I thought to myself, trying to reconcile my preconceived notions about Ryker to what Eirian was sharing with me. *So maybe he really was one of the good guys. Guess you can't believe everyone that lives outside of his bubble. But then what the fuck was the meaning of those night visions?*

"What's on your mind?" She asked curiously.

I took a bite of the bacon piled high on my plate, relishing in the taste of it before answering. Should I really be telling someone I just met about my night visions? I mean sure Ryker knew, but that was different I suppose. Though how *did* he know? I didn't exactly tell him. Best to hold off on telling more people for now.

"I just didn't sleep well, it's been a long week," I said with a yawn, stretching my arms high above my head before continuing to devour my meal.

She took another bite of her breakfast and gave me a look to say she wasn't buying it. Or at least that's what I took it to mean. I took a look around, searching for any familiar faces from my Awakening and groaned internally when I spotted Jonah sporting a pair of ashen horns and black wings. *Why, of all the vakna that awakened, did he have to be here?* I thought to myself and I returned my focus back to Eirian. Her eyes drifted over to the door as it flung open once more and those familiar red and black wings filled the entryway. I watched as her eyes followed him to the front of the room and disappear behind a swinging door.

"That's Ryker," she explained, returning her gaze to me. "He trains all of the cadets, so you'll see him pretty regularly."

"I'd have thought he'd be training one of the higher units," I blurted out a little too quickly. Hopefully she didn't pick up on my nervousness.

She shook her head and swallowed down the bit of toast she'd been eating. "No, that duty belongs to Kiira, Knox and Kallus. Though Ryker does pop in on them from time to time."

Ryker re-emerged through the swinging door and strode over to the table in the center of the room. He sat down a rather large tray of bacon and sausage, biscuits, eggs, butter and jellies in the center of the table before sitting down. Kallus and the other male, who's name I was guessing to be Knox based on my conversation with Eirian, dug in instantly and Kiira shook her head. Ryker reached for a biscuit and smiled when his gaze caught mine.

A shiver ran down my spine, despite the warmth from the sun beating through the glass surrounding us. I could only hope I'd become more comfortable in his presence if he was truly to help me progress during my training.

# CHAPTER



# 40

*Ryker*

The trip to Selke's workshop this morning proved quite fruitful. She'd been the weapons and armor master for the legion since I was just a Cadet. Her craftsmanship and attention to minute details never ceased to amaze me. When I inquired about the cuffs this morning she was all too thrilled to begin drawing up the preliminary design for me to approve during lunch. I'd also had her start the design for a very special piece for me, though I didn't need it yet, I wanted to have it when the time came.

"We should get a move on if we want to take the new cadets up to the training yard early," Kiira suggested beside me.

"Easy now!" Knox protested, with a mouthful of food. "He just got here with *our* breakfast."

I chuckled at them, reaching for another biscuit and a bit of strawberry jam while Knox piled his plate high with sausage links, bacon and biscuits.

"Let 'em eat a little longer. They'll need their strength for today. We're starting with balance. I've noticed quite a few of the new cadets having issues moving about." I said, taking a bite of my food.

No sooner had the words left my mouth when a group of cadets tumbled over while trying to take their seats. I nodded towards them with a raised eyebrow as if to say *see*.

"Speaking of new cadets. Any particular reason you sent me to fetch Red this morning?" Kallus asked, pushing his plate forward and leaning on the table behind it.

Kiira cast me a surprised glance but I ignored it. I sighed before resigning myself to coming clean about my little wildfire.

“She is the female from my night visions,” I said, pausing to take in their reactions. Kallus seemed unaffected by this news while Knox had quit eating and was focused solely on me, eggs hanging precariously from the fork he held. “It would seem she shares them and now that she’s here, they’ve transformed.”

“Transformed how?” Kallus asked.

“I’m the one who takes her,” I said darkly. “With Kiira’s help.”

“So the female in your night visions, whom we’ve all thought to be your mate for years, is here?” Knox reiterated.

I sighed as I took a sip of my water. “Yes.”

“Why didn’t you get her this morning then?” Kallus asked, dropping back in his seat, crossing his arms.

“Asena is currently untrusting of me due to her night visions, this isn’t the first time I’ve appeared as the one to harm her. And I’m afraid our theory about her being my mate is most likely ill conceived as well,” I explained.

Both Kallus and Knox looked at me with bewilderment upon their faces.

“She has vowed herself to another,” Kiira spoke softly beside me, casting empathetic eyes in my direction.

She and I had already had this conversation two times over, and now that she was here at least I could keep an eye on her and ensure her safety. Knox’s face twisted in agony as he tried to imagine his life without Kiira, but a gentle brush of her hand against his was enough to bring him back to reality.

“We’ll discuss this more later, when we can speak more freely,” Kallus stated. “For now we need to get the cadets up the hill.”

“I’ll take care of the food, you three get the troops together,” Kiira offered.

Knox was bouncing in his seat with excitement. This was his first year taking part in the round up, I’d promoted him to Captain just short of one year ago after father appointed me as the new Commander.

“Come on you two, let’s get this show started,” I said, standing from my seat and rounding the table.

“As long as I get to bang the drum again,” Knox said, reaching for it.

“Oh, this morning wasn’t enough?” Kallus joked.



Knox looked as if he was ready to wrestle him to the ground. I cleared my throat and nodded in the direction of several new cadets. Kallus chuckled and strode off toward the entrance of the cafeteria. He and Knox turned their attention in my direction and I nodded at them. Knox picked up the drum that lay at his feet and slung the strap over his head so it hung at his waist. He brought the mallet down on its surface hard and everyone jumped. Everyone but Eirian and Asena, who'd been watching us intently for some time now. I turned my attention away from them and cleared my throat.

“Good morning legion!” I shouted from the center of the room. “Let’s give our new cadets a nice warm welcome shall we?”

Cheers and whoops of joy erupted around the room. The new cadets were easy to spot from here and I nodded to Kallus alerting him to start rounding them up. He began with the group that had fallen over earlier, then a few sitting with their siblings here and there. He'd collected them all and rounded back for my little wildfire, but she stood before he ever reached her and strode toward the entrance where the rest of them stood. The grin on Eirians face told me she'd taken the fear of today away from Asena and I was immensely thankful to her at that moment.

“I’ll see the rest of you after lunch. Enjoy your morning off,” I called over my shoulder as I walked toward the doors.

I turned my attention back to the group of newly awakened Vakna before me and smiled. They parted for me as I walked through the center of them, opened the door and held it open.

“Move!” Kallus ordered.

Knox began beating his drum once more and we walked slowly up the winding path that led to the plateau on the mountainside that held the training yard. At the yard’s entrance stood a large tree, lit by strands of faelight. The ground here was hard and unforgiving, but the dirt ridden land was the best for them to master their balance on. Only then would I be willing to put a sword in their hands, wooden or otherwise. So today, we’d start with the basics.

I’d kept walking until I was standing at the front of the yard then waited for the others to make it as well before I began my speech welcoming them all here. Patiently, I watched as Knox and Kallus arranged the new cadets into a wide spread formation, if one fell we didn’t want them taking down the entire unit. Kiira flew overhead, swooping down and landing at the back of the unit just as Knox disappeared behind the door of the training cabin to place the drum inside. *By the Crystal, he was like a child with that thing.*

“Today we will start with the basics,” I began as I walked in a square around the unit, careful to avoid brushing my wings against theirs. “All

of you, regardless of your birth realm, are new to having wings. Everything you know about balancing your weight in combat has officially changed. You must learn to root yourself to the ground so as to be unmoved by your opponent. For today's lesson you will need to remove your boots and stockings. Your bare feet must be visible so that we can assure your toes are positioned correctly."

One by one the unit dropped into a seated position and removed their shoes and stockings then popped back up to their feet. Once they were standing, I made my rounds, inspecting their relaxed positions. Most were good, though some needed work. It's no wonder they were falling when simply trying to walk, they weren't centering their cores. So that's where we'd start.

"Good. Now to maintain proper balance you must center your core at all times, whether you are on or off of the battlefield. If you can not balance while simply walking about how can we expect you to keep your footing in battle? Kiira will demonstrate for those in the back and Knox will demonstrate for those in the front. Kallus and I will walk around and adjust you as necessary to properly center you. Start with your feet even with your shoulders and a slight bend to your knees. Really dig your toes in, but try to keep yourself balanced between your big toe and your pinky."

Kiira and Knox settled into position as Kallus and I walked the group, adjusting them as needed. When I reached Asena, I took note of her near perfect posture. She'd clearly had training before, though I suppose as the daughter of a Commander that shouldn't have come as a surprise to me. I circled her, the scent of lemon and sunshine filling me, drawing me in.

"Good form, Little Wildfire," I said, barely above a whisper.

She smirked in response but said nothing and I moved back to the front of the group once more.

"Great start. Now let's move on to switching between defensive and offensive stances with a resting pose thrown in here and there. In a defensive stance you will drop your dominant foot back and shift your weight so that it is slightly resting more so on that leg. For offensive, it's the opposite, you will step forward with your dominant foot and shift your weight with it accordingly. Remember to focus on keeping your core aligned and dig your toes in. Now, defensive stance," I ordered.

Once again Kiira and Knox demonstrated as Kallus and I made our way through the unit. Success on the first attempt, not one adjustment was made. Maybe this year's lot would remain here.

"Offensive stance!" I called.

I watched as feet shuffled and though a few wobbled, no one fell. That was progress. Kallus had to adjust a waist here and there as did I, yet once again, *she* was perfection. I was going to have to work to keep my eyes from her during these sessions.

“Very good. Let’s speed things up a bit shall we?” I said, moving to stand at the front of the unit once more. “If you fall we will start over. Once we get through ten successful rotations we will move to booted stances and repeat the process, by the end of day you should at least be able to walk without falling over. Understood?”

“Yes sir!” Resounded throughout the air around me.

“Resting,” I ordered. “Offensive. Defensive. Offensive. Resting”

Good, one rotation down, nine more to go.

“Offensive.” I started again when one of the cadets’ feet slipped and they fell, knocking over the cadet beside them.

Groans sounded throughout the yard.

“From the top. Resting. Offensive. Defensive. Offensive. Resting.” I called.

I continued calling out the rotation, switching it up every now and then, until the unit performed ten successful rotations in a row. Then repeated the process once they had their boots back on. With a bit more difficulty, they eventually completed the ten rotations.

The low gurgle from my stomach told me it was time to break for lunch, then we’d be moving to balance training with their actual unit. If that went well, we’d add in breathing exercises to help them focus and hone that balance while the others sparred in front of them, trying to distract from their task at hand. It was easy to lose concentration when you were in the midst of battle. Though I didn’t expect to be going to war anytime soon, I still expected the legion to be prepared either way.

“Alright. Well done. Let’s break for lunch then we’ll be back at it with the rest of your unit. Dismissed,” I said.

“Thank the Mother, I’m starving!” Knox shouted, bounding down the path and out of sight.

“There’s a surprise.” Kiira said sarcastically, shooting in the air and soaring off towards the domed building in the distance.

Kallus simply shook his head and chuckled before walking off, leaving me alone with the few remaining cadets. I scanned them until she came into view. Unsurprisingly, she was still practicing her balance. A perfectionist in true form, though I didn’t expect perfection from the legion. I began to wonder what expectations were placed upon her

before her arrival here, and if I could somehow work to change what she expected of herself in time.

“You can take a break, you know,” I said with a chuckle.

She said nothing and I frowned. Perhaps that whisper of hope I’d sensed between us earlier was my own imagination running wild. The sun glinted off of the copper cuff that clung to her wrist as she rotated through the movements, almost in a trance like state. I began to wonder when I’d have the displeasure of running into Kyllan and why I’d agreed to allow him passage here. Though I knew the true reason. I’d burn this world for her if she asked me to, simply to ensure her happiness. The hold this little wildfire had on me was dangerous, and the fact that she felt nothing but fear where I was concerned threatened to break me in ways I didn’t know possible.

# CHAPTER



# 41

## *Asena*

Training this morning had been grueling, though on the positive side I managed to be positioned on the opposite side of the unit from Jonah. Yet I still had a spectacular view every time he stumbled, it seemed his cockiness in the cave was in fact not warranted. I giggled quietly to myself at the memory as I opened the doors to the cafeteria, wincing slightly at the weight of the doors. It was only lunchtime and every muscle in my body was already screaming at me. I made a mental note to punch Kyllan for letting me believe my awakened form would be able to take the punishment I'd put it through during training. Though he'd probably fuss at me for not stretching. I'd finally left the yard this morning only when Kiira swooped in to see what was holding Ryker behind, turns out it was me. I'd wanted a few moments to hone my balance so I wouldn't make a fool of myself in front of the rest of my unit and he just stood there, watching me like a weirdo.

I spotted Eirian immediately, sitting at the same table we'd been at for breakfast and joined her once I'd gone through the buffet line to receive lunch, roast beef sandwiches on pita bread.

"There you are," she said as I took my seat across from her. "Where were you?"

"Oh. I just stayed in the yard a bit longer to practice my balancing techniques between positions," I explained, taking a bite of my sandwich.

“Already taking Ryker up on those additional training sessions?” She asked with a raised eyebrow.

I shook my head, swallowing down another bite before I spoke again. “No. He hasn’t offered. I just don’t want to hold the unit back. I was taught that the unit is only as strong as its weakest member, I don’t want that to be me.”

She stared at me like I had five heads. “While yes technically that’s true, that’s not how it works here. If someone is having difficulty the unit helps them grow and get better. The legion is big on comradery, you will find that no one will fault you for failing here. It’s been quite different since Ryker took over as commander. He doesn’t see failure as weakness, just an opportunity to grow.”

*Such a great guy. Not. He plans on kidnapping me with Kiira’s help, why else would the Mother warn me with those visions every night. He truly has everyone here fooled, and it looks like I’m on my own to find out my heritage.* I thought to myself.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said with a smile.

“Good. If you need help just ask, I get it if you don’t necessarily want to ask your Commander for additional help. Though, you could always ask Knox or Kallus. I’m sure they’d help you, Kiira as well,” she offered.

I recoiled slightly at the mention of Kiira’s name and the thought of spending time alone with her. I hadn’t shared that nugget of information with Ryker last night and I wasn’t planning on it, not if my night visions were to come to pass.

“I might just take you up on that, Eirian. Even with getting the skills down, a little extra training never hurt right?” I smiled at her in an attempt to hide any fear on my face.

The cafeteria was starting to empty as we finished our meal, but Eirian didn’t seem in a hurry to get back up the hill. Though I suppose when you can fly, travel is much quicker. I started to wonder when I’d be taught how to use these infernal wings.

“You know I can’t fly yet right?” I asked, finishing the last bite of my sandwich.

She laughed. “No but I do, I can carry you up there, if you’d like.”

“Very much! I’ve never flown before, how would that work?” I asked excitedly.

“Quite simply really I’ll just carry you in my arms up there, I’m stronger than I look, promise. Shall we get going?” She asked.

I stood in response and headed for the door, stopping only to deposit my tray at the bin above the trash.

“Keep your wings tucked in tight.” She instructed as she scooped me up, placing one arm behind my knees and the other against my lower back.

Wind whipped my hair wildly as she shot straight into the air. A euphoric sensation of indescribable joy and weightlessness washed through me as she flapped her violet wings, soaring high above the grounds then dove straight for the yard. Heads turned our direction as she deposited me onto the ground at the back of the unit. Slowly they turned their attention forward and I went to stand to the side with the other new cadets I’d trained with this morning and Eirian fell in line.

I stretched casually as Ryker rearranged the unit, creating empty spaces between the veteran members so the rookies could be positioned between them. Ryker cast a glance at the space between Eirian and a rather tall male with golden wings and chocolate hair. He ran a hand through his disheveled hair and sauntered toward me.

“Asena, you will be placed here until rank promotions. Eirian and Garreth are two of my top cadets, you would be wise to use their experience here to your advantage,” he said coolly then turned on his heel and set off toward the line of rookies again.

*So this was the infamous Garreth from her Awakening*, I thought to myself. The sound of wings beating drew my attention upward just in time to see Kiira’s scarlet wings leading a rainbow of dragonian bodies through the sky above us, shifting in their flight patterns as they moved. It was mesmerizing to watch the fluidity of their movements and I hoped that one day my unit would be that in tune.

“Take a look to your left then again to your right,” Ryker called from somewhere behind me, his voice growing closer as he spoke. “This will be the new formation for six months-time. Once unit promotions are given out, those from the back will move forward to fill the empty spaces. I highly advise you to get to know your entire unit. They are your brethren and you will move as one. You will train together and eat together. Your housing cabins have already been placed in the same rows.”

I glanced around and realized what he spoke was the truth. I recognized at least half of these faces from my not so pleasant wake up this morning, including Jonah's.

"Now let's see if our rookies can keep up, shall we veterans?" His voice rang out.

"Yes sir!" The unit answered in unison.

He chuckled to himself and began calling out positions. I tried to remember everything we'd been taught this morning. Ground your toes, center your core, leg forward for offense, back for defense. Then repeat.

"Good. Now let's have a pair of sparring volunteers," he requested.

Eirian and Garreth both shot to the front of the unit and looked at each other smugly.

"Ah yes. The rivals of the unit. Let's see what you've got shall we? While these two spar and try to distract you from your task at hand, I will be calling out positions. For each ten rotations you do successfully as a unit, another pair will begin sparring. Rookies, if you are successful today. You will be the last standing while the veterans spar around you. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" We called out excitedly.

"Begin!" He commanded.

Eirian landed the first blow, slamming a fist into the right side of Garreth's rib cage. Then Ryker started calling out positions.

"Defensive." He called as Garreth narrowly dodged a left kick from Eirian.

"Offensive. Resting. Focus cadets. Offensive." He commanded.

Over and over we went through the rotation, and I couldn't spare a glance to see how my new acquaintance was fairing. I needed my focus to be solely on my task at hand, not the battles around me.

"Wonderful. Let's have another sparring group. Kai and Soren set up just over there." He ordered, pointing to the left flank of the unit.

Another ten rotations went by and another pair was selected. On and on we moved from position to position to position while fights raged around us. We kept going until our motions were fluid, in perfect sync with one another while being aware of the battles taking place, but not distracted by them. I was pleased that my first day of



training here was far more successful than the one in Herbexia had been. If there was any positive to the Crystal's outcome it was that here, there didn't seem to be anyone akin to Beckett and Woodard. *Thank the Mother for that.*

"Fall in." Ryker ordered.

The sparring stopped and the veterans returned to their positions beside us.

"Beautiful job today, cadets. If you lot keep this pace, I wager you'll be training with practice swords in no time." He began as he paced around the outside of the unit. "I truly hope you all feel welcome here in Vekroth. While it may have always been home for some of us, it is still new for quite a few of you. As is custom here, Lord Elias will be hosting a welcoming celebration at the week's end. You will all be given a day of rest the day prior to assure your affairs are in order so that you are able to attend. It is not mandatory, but I do highly encourage each of you to put on a brave face and celebrate the new life brought to our realm. That is all for today, you are dismissed."

*Great. Another shopping trip with these stupid wings. I thought to myself. Or I could just simply not go. Though something told me that would be highly frowned upon. The unit started to disperse, some taking to the skies, others setting off on foot. I instead chose to remain in the yard a bit longer and dropped to a seated position. With my legs outstretched in front of me, I began to stretch. Running through each position Kyllan and I normally would have, though without a partner, the stretches weren't quite as deep. I'd just finished my side lunge stretch when I noticed Ryker was still here, staring at me. A bit unnerving really.*

"Most of your unit could benefit from your lead. Half of them will be too sore to walk tomorrow." He called as he approached.

"Kyllan is who got me in the habit. Says the body needs to make room for the additional muscle. So, now I stretch each morning before breakfast and in the evening after training. Bit of a warm up and cooldown honestly." I replied, moving into my arm stretches.

"During this cooldown, do you focus on your breathing at all?" He asked curiously, joining me on the ground.

*He was absolutely out of his mind if he thought he'd be helping me stretch in the ways Kyllan did.*

"No, should I be?" I answered, returning his curiosity.

“It certainly wouldn’t hurt. I could teach you, after tomorrow’s session. We’ll be focusing on breathing techniques and once you’ve learned those it’ll be a bit easier for you to focus on calming your heart rate during the cooldown.” He offered.

Boots shuffled against the ground as the unit continued to take their leave. I searched his face for any hint of malice that was hidden behind those words but came up empty handed. He was still looking at me, awaiting an answer.

“Oh. Okay.” I said nervously.

*What the fuck was that? I’d meant to tell him no, why had I just agreed to spending time alone with him? Mother above save me from myself.* The sound of boots scuffling began to fade around us and I looked at him once again.

“I have something for you Little Wildfire. Will you wait here while I fetch it?” He asked earnestly.

*This is it. The beginning of every night vision.* I felt my power well up inside of me, threatening to erupt as fear set in. Ryker’s face was twisted in anguish as he took in my face, I quickly placed a mask of indifference where my fear ridden expression had taken over. He looked to our left where a small group of my unit mates still stood, Eirian amongst them, casting a glance my way every now and then. *This isn’t your night vision. This is real. There are never others present when you’re taken. You’re safe, Asena.* I told myself.

I nodded in response to his question, unable to speak while still in fear’s unyielding grasp.

“I’ll be right back, you’ll be okay here?” He asked.

I shook my head once again, still rendered speechless. I just needed him to go away. I needed this moment to be over. Once this came to pass and I was still standing here, then maybe the visions would stop plaguing me each night.

He turned on his heel and strode off towards the cabin at the edge of the yard. I expelled several deep breaths in attempts to calm myself. He was gone, though a few of my other unit mates were here, it didn’t mean I was completely safe. Eirian strode over to me, where I was waiting for Ryker to return.

“You did well today.” She complimented.

“Thanks. You weren’t so bad yourself, though I’m afraid I stopped trying to watch after Garreth narrowly missed that high kick

to the shoulder.” I said.

She barked out a laugh. “Yea, he’s a slippery one, that Garreth. Did I overhear Ryker say he’s going to help you with the breathing exercises?”

“Yes.” I said sheepishly. “To help during my stretching before and after training.”

“Good, I’m glad you didn’t hesitate when the extra help was offered. I’d offer to help as well, but I’m afraid I’m shit at teaching the basics. When we get into sparring or even flying, that’s where I excel at teaching, I can help you with that if you’d like?”

“Never hurts to have a jump start right?” I answered.

She smiled. “Sure doesn’t Red. I’m heading back to my cabin to shower. I’ll see you at dinner?”

I shook my head. “See you there.”

She strode off down the path that led toward the housing cabins, and I turned back in the direction of the small cabin at the edge of the yard once more. Ryker appeared a moment later, fidgeting with something in his hand.

I looked around to find that once again I’d found myself alone with him. My mind was screaming at me to run, but I didn’t. As much as I should fear him, and should be keeping him at more than an arm’s length away, that annoying innate pull towards him had become much more prominent since my arrival here. So I stayed put while he continued to cross the length of the yard back to me.

As he drew closer I made out two small bits of black metal between his fingers. *Are those? When did he have time to go get them?* A smile slid in place when he noticed where my gaze had landed. *Mother above that smile. Get a hold of yourself Asena, this male wants to kidnap you. You can not be attracted to a psychopath.*

“As promised. Two vow cuffs.” Ryker purred, coming to a stop mere inches from me.

“When did you have the time to get these?” I asked quizzically.

“Oh I didn’t.” He chuckled, “Selke brought them while you were training, I suppose you were so focused you didn’t see her come and go.”

He held the thinner of the two bands up, and I plucked it from his grasp. As I’d requested the band was predominantly black in its make up. A set of thin red elongated wings extended from a

twinkling obsidian stone embedded in the center of the band. It was beautiful. I smiled as I took in the finer details of the thicker band he still held in his hand. It was identical to mine, except the wings. A deep teal set of wings extended from the obsidian stone, a shade that mimicked the ones at my back. I glanced back to my own band and noted the black shading between the ridges on the wings of my band.

“The wings.” I said, my voice barely more than a whisper. “They’re....”

“They’re ours.” He murmured. “I wanted these to represent us and our vow in every way. Starting with your request that they be black, so as to match your armor. If you don’t like them, I can have Selke remake them.”

I shook my head and looked up at him. His disheveled hair hung loose over his forehead and I think I preferred him this way. More *real*. The other times I’d seen him he’d been pressed and primped to look his best. I had a feeling deep down, he preferred his Dragonian leathers over a suit and tie any day.

*Why does it matter what he likes? I thought to myself. Listen Asena, if you can get inside his head maybe you’ll be able to see what is motivating him to try and steal you.*

My inner self was truly becoming more cunning than I gave her credit for. I’d use our time after training to try to get to know him better. I’d just need to be careful to not get too close and lose sight of my end goal. To stay *alive* and *unharmed*, and it would all start here. With the cuff that sat nestled in my hand.

“It’s perfect Ryker. Thank you.” I answered finally.

He seemed to relax a little and said, “I’m glad. I was hoping you’d like them. If you’re ready I’m prepared to make my vow to you. I don’t need you to make one in return, only to accept me at my word.”

“I’m ready.” I said, trying to remain calm.

The weight of what I was about to do was not lost on me. I knew that I was willingly entering a promise that the Mother would see upheld with the male that haunted my dreams.

“Asena Montalli,” He began, “I vow never to harm you, physically or emotionally, and to never order your mistreatment. I vow to protect you always, and to search for you to the Kingdom’s end and beyond if your night visions come to fruition and you are taken from this place.”

He caressed my cheek and lightly ran a thumb over it as he spoke the last words.

“Asena I vow to hunt down anyone that would dare lay a hand on you and serve justice as I see fit for their crime.” He dropped his hand and I placed the cuff on his wrist.

His words were more than I expected and my mind was running wild, trying to make sense of how far he was willing to go to protect me and keep me from harm’s way. He smiled as he stood before me, waiting for me to accept his promise of safety, of justice to those that would harm me.

I didn’t have a speech planned like he clearly had, so I simply said, “I accept your vow and promise to never question the words you spoke here today.”

He placed the winged cuff on my left wrist and grinned widely, like he’d been waiting for this day his entire life. I tried not to let myself think about that too much, but I swear I saw that smile in his sapphire eyes. A brilliant silver glow began to emit from the cuffs at our wrists, wrapping its way around us as I stood staring at the male before me. This was much different than my vow with Kyllan had been, almost as if the Mother deemed it more.

# CHAPTER



## 42

### *Asena*

The letter I'd written to Kyllan last night haunted me as I readied for the day. He needed to know of the vow I'd made with Ryker, and I didn't expect him to be happy about it. Perhaps that's why it still sat on the small table in the quaint kitchen of my cabin, mocking me everytime I passed it.

"Fine!" I shouted at the blasted thing.

I folded it into the familiar shape of a wolf and sent it on its way. I'd also asked when he planned on coming to visit, and said a silent prayer to the Mother that it wasn't during the celebration here. Eirian had informed me at dinner that it was expected that all new recruits attend, just as I'd assumed. Though she had promised to take me to the shopping district in Soleia, Vekroth's capital, to get a new gown in two day's time.

There was a rapping at the door just as I'd sat down to lace my boots, which I also planned on replacing when I went to the capital with Eirian. I sighed and sat my boots to the side of the chair and strode across the floor to the door, opening it slightly to see Ryker standing outside my door.

"Good morning, Little Wildfire. I was wondering if I might accompany you to breakfast this morning," He asked cheerfully.

"Um, sure. Let me just put my boots on," I replied.

I walked back to the chair where my boots sat, slid my feet in and began lacing them. I certainly wasn't expecting him to show up at my door this morning, though I was well rested today. With Ryker's vow to me firmly in place, my sleep wasn't plagued by night visions. Hopefully

that would continue to be the pattern. I finished lacing my boots as he stood, leaning against my doorway, looking into the cabin that I called home these days. Though there wasn't much that distinguished it as my own. The walls were empty, shelves sat unfilled, and I was more than happy to continue to use the bedding that was here when I'd arrived.

"Did you not bring anything from home?" He asked curiously.

"No, unfortunately I didn't have time to grab my trunk before leaving. Things got rather *complicated*." I said vaguely.

His smile faded, "Complicated? Is that what we're calling it?"

"Yep," I snapped and hopped to my feet.

I shoved past him, brushing his wing slightly and he shivered. His hand grasped my wrist lightly and he pulled me back in the cabin, pinning me against the wall. Panic burned my chest as he rested a hand against the wall beside my head.

"Little Wildfire, I'm quite aware you aren't familiar with Dragonian customs. So allow me to enlighten you," He purred.

I swallowed down my rebuttal as he trailed a finger down the middle of my left wing. Ecstasy blossomed from the gentle touch, and he smirked knowingly as I bit down on the desire to ask him to do it again.

"You see, our wings are the most sensitive part of our body," He whispered, leaning down so his lips almost brushed the crest of my ear.

Heat wrapped its way around me and I reveled at the familiar touch of his magik. *Crystal help me*. I should not be feeling this way about *him*.

"Good to know. I'll be sure to tuck that nugget of information away for later," I teased.

Ryker backed away and crossed his arms over his chest. Clad in his training leathers he looked like the most delectable nightmare, yet something was different from how he appeared in my night visions but I couldn't place it.

We exited the cabin and set off toward the domed glass building across camp.

"So are you going to tell me what really happened the day Kiira went to Herbexia?" He asked, cocking his eyebrow as we walked.

Why was he pushing this subject? I didn't exactly want him knowing my lineage was potentially dangerous. I picked up my pace in an effort to put some distance between us and end this conversation.

"Does it have to do with the reason you won't look at yourself in the mirror?" He called after me.

I stopped dead in my tracks and whirled around to face him. What the fuck did he know about any of it?

“Of course she told you.” I scoffed. “I should have known better, what with her being your second in command.”

“It wasn’t Kiira who told me Asena. It was Selke,” He said softly, closing the distance between us. “Were your parents really so disapproving of your Awakened form that you can’t bear to look at yourself in the mirror?”

His eyes searched mine, awaiting an answer. It would be easy, so easy. To just let him think that was the reason I left without my belongings, that since becoming Awakened I felt more alone than I had my entire life. A feeling that I was not at all used to or fond of. But that wasn’t the truth of it at all and for some reason, I wanted to lay myself bare at his feet.

I opened my mouth to speak but was quieted by his words. “If you are not ready to speak of what happened it is okay, Little Wildfire. You should know that Selke did not tell me to be malicious but out of concern. She herself knows how hard the transition can be from one of the outlying Realms to Vekroth. I’m sure if you asked, she would grant you her council.”

He placed a calming hand at my back as we began walking again.

“Selke isn’t from Vekroth?” I asked.

“Surprisingly no,” He said lightly. “She is originally from Utthaven. Her family was not kind to her when she was Awakened. They did not want her to go through the ceremony as the idea of magik in the kingdom was still fairly new. So naturally when she Awakened as a Dragonian they were less than pleased.”

“She seems well acclimated here though,” I offered, not sure what to say.

“It took a long time but she did finally come around to her new form, and once she did, her abilities blossomed. At least that’s the way she describes it,” He said just as we reached the cafeteria.

He pulled the door toward us and held it open for me. I murmured my thanks and passed him, careful not to brush his wing this time. The line wasn’t too long, thankfully. I glanced around and found Eirian’s gaze glued to me with a bewildered expression on her face. Which was only enhanced when Ryker approached her with two thermoses full of what I assumed to be coffee, sat them down on the table and walked toward the back of the cafeteria just as he had yesterday. I’d made it through the line fairly quickly, then walked toward the center of the room and sat down across from Eirian.



“You want to tell me why you arrived with Ryker and why he’s suddenly bringing coffee to the table I’ve sat at for the past year?” She asked, wasting no time getting to the point.

I took a bite of my bacon before responding. “He knocked on my door this morning and asked if he could walk with me. Turns out he wanted to see how I was settling in.”

“And the coffee?” She raised an eyebrow as drank from her thermos.

“I haven’t been sleeping well and I suppose he was just being nice. Everyone keeps saying he is, I guess now I’m seeing it for myself,” I countered.

She seemed satisfied with that answer and took another bite of her breakfast.

“So the welcoming celebration, what should I expect?” I asked, trying to ease the tension between us.

“It’s fun really. You’ll get to see the inside of Khisfire Palace and they serve the *best* food. Not to mention the clothes everyone wears, bit refreshing to see all of these brutes out of their leathers and cleaned up looking dapper.” She gestured around the room as she spoke.

“You’re going then?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t miss it. Besides, who else would you go with?” She laughed.

I was thankful for that, hopefully I could avoid finding myself alone in empty corridors with Ryker this time.

“Come on, best get a move on if we don’t want to be late,” Eirian said, rising from the table.

I followed her outside and just like yesterday, she scooped me up and shot into the sky heading straight for the training yard. She landed with a flourish and sat me on the ground. I walked to where the back of the unit stood yesterday and sat on the hard ground. My legs were stretched out in front of me as I began my regimen of stretches. It wasn’t long before Eirian and even Garreth joined me in limbering up for the day.

Ryker arrived just as the three of us finished stretching our arms and popped to our feet. We quickly took our places in formation before Ryker called the unit to attention. Today we would be focusing on breathing techniques as it was important to remain calm in battle so as not to lose focus.

“Relax your neck and shoulders. Breathe in through your nose for two counts then exhale through your mouth for four counts.” He instructed.

We repeated that exercise nearly thirty times. Over and over, in through the nose, out through the mouth. All while he made the rounds, inspecting each new cadet's technique to make sure they were doing it right. Naturally, we'd all excelled at the exercise.

"Now let's combine that breathing technique with the rotation of positions shall we?" He ordered.

He called out the rotation until we successfully made it through five times. Happy with our progress, he began pulling pairs to spar around us just as he did yesterday. Resting. Defensive. Offensive. Control your breathing. I surprised myself with how well I seemed to be getting the hang of the movements with the breathing technique.

"That's lunch." Ryker barked as we came back into resting position one last time. "When you return we will move to training with your magik. It is important that you learn to control it before you learn to attack with it. Dismissed"

The thought of wielding my magik was unnerving. In untrained hands fire could be destructive and the magik I grew up seeing was meant to create. Though I supposed it did have its perks, I would be able to control not just flame but heat itself, maybe then I wouldn't long for the heat that Ryker so often provided.

I trudged down the path with the rest of the unit. They were buzzing with excitement at the prospect of finally getting to use their powers and I suppose I couldn't blame them.

"Thought you'd be more excited about getting to use your powers," Garreth's husky voice sounded behind me.

"I am, just hungry and a bit tired is all. I'm sure my excitement will shine through once I've gotten some food in my belly," I said, trying to hide any reluctance that might be showing.

The towering male sped up his pace so he fell into step beside me. "You're doing quite well, Red. Better than most of the cadets that grew up here if I'm being honest. Don't be afraid of the power that lives inside you."

"I won't," I lied.

Even now, surrounded by those that would surely help me rein it in, the thought of releasing my power consumed me with fear.

# CHAPTER



## 43

*Asena*

“Welcome back Cadets.” Ryker’s deep voice carried throughout the yard. “I want you to recall the breathing exercise you learned this morning while we work on trying to call your power forward. Focus on the warmth that lives within you and breathe.”

In an attempt to do what he’d instructed, I searched for the warmth that brewed within me. I could feel it but there was something *else* that lay alongside it, something I couldn’t place. Yet still I reached for that warmth, that fire that lived deep inside the well of my heart. It wouldn’t come when I called it, staying firmly in place like a petulant child.

“Keep trying,” Eirian encouraged beside me, a ball of flame in each hand.

I latched on to that sight, closed my eyes, and willed my power to the surface. Nothing. Not even a spark.

“Don’t fear it, Red. It won’t come if you’ve any doubts of wielding it,” Garreth murmured encouragingly.

Glancing over, I saw the two balls of flame in his hands as well. Then I looked around. Every other cadet in our unit had managed to produce some sort of flame in their hands, even Jonah was sporting two oblong spheres of flame in his upturned palms. It was easy to spot the veterans as their flames were perfectly spherical in shape while the rookies were slightly obtuse or just a wild flame altogether with no shape at all. Yet there I stood, empty handed. And I couldn’t help but wonder what was wrong with me. I was so used to excelling at everything I set my mind to as failure was never an option growing up.

Once again I closed my eyes and focused. A foreign chill skipped against my spine when I reached for my power again. The warmth slipped from my grasp as I tried to pull it to the surface. I begged internally for it to show itself, pleading with my own mind to will that flame into existence. A warm hand gently rested atop my shoulder and I latched onto it. That warmth spread throughout me, diving into the well of magik within me and ripped my flame to the surface.

I felt heat, true heat, living within my upturned palms and my eyes shot open. Surprise and elation raced through me at the sight of those tiny flames dancing in my hands. My eyes flicked upward to take in the face of the one whose warmth gave me the strength to rip through my fear and call upon my power. Though he was still positioned at the front of the unit, I knew he'd used his magik to call to mine. I took this moment with my unnoticed stolen glance to appreciate the male I'd linked myself to. Ryker really was striking. His jawline was strong and harsh, but not too sharp and held no sign of stubble. In fact his tanned skin looked smooth as silk, aside from his calloused hands. Well, what I'd seen of it anyway.

The flame in my hands faltered as his gaze flicked toward me then away again, pulling his warmth back in and I couldn't help but feel *empty*.

"I knew you'd get it Red!" Eirian and Garreth praised.

I smiled halfheartedly. Did I really though, or had Ryker simply used his power to overtake mine?

"Now that you have all successfully called upon the flame inside you, I want you to work on molding it. Focus on a basic shape, it can be as simple or complex as you'd like. Veterans I expect to see some flare here, rookies don't feel pressured to overdo it." Ryker instructed.

I watched in awe as he demonstrated molding his own flame. Each ball tripled in size before he combined them, his face twisting with concentration as two wings burst from the oblong shape he'd created. Before I knew it I was gaping at the sight of the dragon made of flame before me. With a wave of his hand it flew in the air around us. Soaring high then diving low, careful not to get too close to any of the unit. It was breathtaking to watch his creation, and that's when I realized it. Fire could create as well, it wasn't just a tool of destruction as the other realms led us to believe. The Crystal hadn't given me the shadowed fate that I'd assumed it had.

With newfound courage I latched onto the fire in my hands and tried to mold the two flames into one. It took every ounce of concentration and control I had in my body but I managed to form a rather large flame,

though try as I might it wouldn't bend to my will any further. I couldn't get it to mold into any sort of shape.

"Remember to focus on your breathing. Keep yourselves grounded as you shape your magik." Ryker's voice called out from somewhere behind me.

Once again, I did as he instructed. I moved into offensive position grinding my feet against the dirt, finding my footing. The large flame shrunk in size and I focused on my breathing, trying to hone the shape I wanted my flame to form. My thoughts wandered to Herbexia and what I left behind there, then to my parents and the secrets they kept. The more I tried to run from those thoughts the more they seemed to consume me and before I knew it, my flame grew wildly in size, threatening to grow out of control.

"Asena, calm down. Remember to focus solely on your magic. Don't let your emotions in." Eirian instructed beside me.

I pulled myself from the thoughts of my parents and shifted my focus to Kyllan. To something that made me feel good and happy. With it my flame began to tame itself.

"That's it Asena. Don't let fear win, it has no place here." Garreth's low tenor voice encouraged.

Cheers of encouragement began erupting around me and I was suddenly painfully aware that the entire unit was watching me. My flame tried to grow again in size, but I refused it. I took hold of my emotions, shoving the shame and embarrassment of losing control down deep. The heat from the flames licked at my skin while I worked the large jumbled mess of flames causing sweat to bead across my forehead. When I was done, the flames had taken on the shape of a perfectly round sphere.

It wasn't much, but I'd done it. I'd conquered my magik and overtaken my emotions, for today at least. I let my flame sputter out, releasing my hold on the well of magik within me.

"Great work today Cadets," Ryker called out as he returned to his place at the front of the unit. "All of you."

His eyes landed on me as he made that last statement and I couldn't help but feel he was lying. That somehow he expected more of me. Letting my commander down was not something I took lightly, even if he was an overgrown lizard. *Perhaps I needed those extra lessons to help keep my emotions in check when working with my magik*, I thought to myself.

"Tomorrow is our last day of training for the week, come prepared to work on controlling your magik again. Dismissed." He ordered.

The unit began to disperse, but Eirian and Garreth hung back, watching me. I decided to skip the additional stance practice today and move right into stretching. Crouching down, I began working through my lunges, taking solace in the delightful way my hamstrings contracted as I deepened the movements.

“You did really well today Red,” Garreth said, standing there awkwardly.

“Sure,” I scoffed. “I only lost my head and let my flame grow out of control.”

Eirian shook her head. “You didn’t. You lost focus for a moment, yes, but you regained control and recovered quickly.”

“I guess so,” I said, switching legs.

I appreciated that she and Garreth were trying to make me feel better about my performance today, but I knew I’d failed. I couldn’t even manage to call upon my power on my own, not that I’d admit that to anyone out loud. In fact, I had half a mind to scold Ryker for it.

“I’ll catch you two later, try to talk some sense into her, would you Eirian?” Garreth called, his boots scuffing against the ground as he walked away.

She watched him walk away with the last of the unit then turned back to me.

“You wanna tell me what it was that got you so sideways today?” She asked.

“Not particularly,” I replied, my tone clipped.

I wasn’t ready to let her in, hell I hadn’t even told Kyllan what happened before I left Herbexia. That yet again, my parents were lying to me, were keeping things from me. I quickly shoved down the hurt that was rising within me, begging to escape.

“Look, when you’re ready to talk about it, you know where to find me. If you don’t want to talk to me about it, talk to someone. Okay?” Eirian said, her tone filled with sincerity.

“I’ll try,” I murmured.

She nodded at me then shot into the air, soaring high above before diving toward our unit’s section of housing. I took up my usual spot on the ground in the center of the yard and began moving through the movements to stretch my back. Kneeling with my knees against the ground, I rested on my heels and slid my hands forward across the ground in front of me. My wings stretched out and I almost moaned at the blissful release of tension the position provided.

I brought my wings back in and returned to an upright seated position only to be greeted by the sight of Ryker's red and black wings splayed before me. I was taken aback at his ability to remain quiet and simply join me in stretching, it was so *unlike* him. It made me think that maybe there was more to him than he let on. He sat up slowly, and I took in the fluidity of his movements, like he'd done this a thousand times. His eyes met mine and I felt the heat rise in my cheeks.

"You were quite impressive today, Little Wildfire," He said with a smile.

"Oh yes, losing control and almost setting oneself on fire is quite impressive isn't it?" I replied sardonically, not bothering to address the elephant in the arena.

He shook his head. "You truly don't know how rare it is do you? Not everyone can regain control like that. I was ready to step in, to honor the vow I made to you yesterday."

"But you didn't," I snapped.

"No. I didn't," he said, his eyes bright with pride. "Because a moment before I took a step toward you I sensed the shift in your magik. You took control of your emotions and regained power over your flame. There have only been a handful of cadets to ever do that the first time wielding their power."

"I... I didn't realize," I said, shifting so my legs were outstretched in front of me.

I resumed my stretches as he continued to stare at me incredulously. He let out a sigh and ran a hand through his hair, disheveling it just so.

"I don't expect perfection, Asena. If I did I would be setting the Legion up for failure. Perfection does not exist and it shouldn't be something we strive for. Asking for help doesn't make you weak, in fact you will find that it is readily available to those who ask for it. In any form." His tone was sincere as he sat across from me, piercing my soul with each word.

I bit my lip as I took in what he was saying. Was that why he ripped my power from me today? Maybe there was someone here who would have some sort of understanding of what I was going through.

"I'll talk to Selke soon, when I'm ready," I promised.

"I think you will find it will do you quite a bit of good. In the meantime, if you find that you would like additional help honing your control, we can practice early before breakfast or after lunch on our off days. I will leave that up to you, again provided you feel comfortable to do so." He offered.

I considered his offer carefully and I *did* need the extra training.

“Sure,” I replied indifferently.

“We can start tomorrow morning if you’d like?” He suggested, a hint of cautiousness to his tone.

I pulled my arm across my chest, holding it tight with my other, stretching the muscles in my shoulders and biceps as I pondered being alone with him that early.

“Fine,” I said, sighing as the words left my lips.

As much as I hated getting up early, and the thought of spending time alone with him before the rest of the camp was awake sent chills through me, I did feel like I needed the additional guidance. So I’d accepted his offer and traded my ever elusive sleep for an extra hour on the training field each morning.

“We should probably get going, dinner will be served soon. You’re free to stay here of course, but I’d be happy to walk you or even fly you back to your cabin,” he said, getting to his feet.

“Why is it that every male treats me like I’m some breakable thing? I don’t need a bodyguard, you know. I’m perfectly capable of handling myself.”

I hopped up, gaining my footing instantly and he smirked at the way I stood my own ground. My balance had greatly improved since coming here which was in no small part due to the training of the male that stood before me. Even though I was currently annoyed with him, I could admit he was a decent trainer.

He shook his head. “I don’t think you need a bodyguard as you so eloquently put it. I offer to accompany you, Little Wildfire, because I thoroughly enjoy being in your presence, in standing in your light. Even if that light is dimmed by those that can’t see it.”

He enjoyed my company? I stood, looking at him quizzically. He was threatening to take a few bricks out of that wall I’d built around myself when I’d arrived here, and I couldn’t have that. I didn’t want to let anyone in, much less *him*.

“What are you playing at?” I asked with mistrust.

“Nothing, Asena. I’d simply like to enjoy your company, if you’ll allow me,” he replied genuinely with a smile.

Perhaps he wasn’t as monstrous as I thought him to be. Though, there was only one way to find out for sure I supposed.

“You can fly me home,” I said hesitantly.



He looked like he might explode with joy as his smile widened into a grin. I couldn't help but smile warmly at the way he lit up, he looked like a child during the winter solstice.

"Ready?" He asked excitedly.

I shook my head. "Yes."

The scent of amber and musk surrounded me as he scooped me up into his arms, holding me close then shooting into the air. Tendrils of heat encompassed my body as he flew gracefully toward the section of housing where my cabin was located. Wind whipped the loose wisps of hair that had fallen from my braid as he made his descent, landing just outside my door. He sat me gently back on my feet, coolness trickling in where his arms had been just moments ago.

"So tomorrow morning then?" He asked awkwardly.

"Just know you'll most likely be waking me up when you knock on my door," I laughed.

He chuckled and said, "It's okay, Little Wildfire, I'll always wait for you."

I blushed at the sentiment. "Well, I need to clean up before dinner. I'll see you in the morning."

"Enjoy your evening, Asena," he replied before shooting into the air again.

I entered my cabin and found a paper dove perched on the counter awaiting my return. Kyllan's response had come quicker than I expected. Anxious, I carefully tapped the dove on its head, removing the magik the pixie dust provided and the parchment fell open. Scrawled upon it in Kyllan's familiar handwriting were two sentences.

*Asena,*

*We need to talk about this. I'll see you in two days' time.*

*-Kyllan*

He was coming here sooner than we planned, and the day I was supposed to be shopping with Eirian. I'd have to explain that I couldn't join her and see if she could just pick me up something instead. But first I needed to eat, training had left me feeling empty and starved.

# CHAPTER



## 44

*Ryker*

Holding her in my arms was the highest form of ecstasy I could ever imagine, and it seemed the Mother deemed it fit that I would experience each of her emotions, not just fear, now that the vow was in place. Feeling the pure joy that ran through her at the sense of soaring through the air, it was indescribable. I'd been taken aback that she'd agreed at all, knowing that it would mean she'd have to place her trust in me to keep her safe, if even only briefly. It would be that way until the new recruits learned to fly in the coming months, though perhaps I'd give her a head start during our morning lessons. She just needed to regain her confidence first.

I landed outside her door softly and rapped on the wide wooden door. A slew of curses sounded from the other side followed by a crash. I chuckled as I knocked again.

"You okay in there, Little Wildfire?" I asked through the thick door.

"Yea, just trying to hurry, I want to make sure we have plenty of time to prepare me before today's lesson." Her words came out rushed, her tone frantic.

Another slew of curses followed the sound of what I was sure to be her tripping over something.

"No need to rush. I'm happy to wait," I reminded her.

She yanked the door open and I couldn't help but smile at her appearance. Her hair was still disheveled from sleep and she donned

the sleepwear I'd placed in the cadets cabins shortly before their arrival. I had to admit she looked better in black than I'd imagined, even if it was just a backless top and some sweatpants.

"At least wait inside, I don't need the rest of the unit seeing our Commander outside my door this early," she huffed.

Part of me wanted to laugh at her being worried about what the unit thought but the other part was overrun with joy that she was actually inviting me in. That the beautiful creature before me once again was creeping ever closer to having me within her proximity. Perhaps the vow was already serving its purpose.

"What's got you out of sorts this morning?" I asked curiously, taking a seat at the small table in the kitchen.

The sound of water running in the sink drowned out her response. I sighed heavily and took a look around. She really didn't have anything here that was her own. I'd have to talk to Kyllan when he visited, see if he could manage a trip home between visits to fetch her things. Though I imagined that would go over about as well as trying to bathe one of the Sutare that ran through the grounds seeing as he held me in high disregard.

"Ready?" She asked.

Her footsteps were much more even than they'd been before I'd entered her cabin as she emerged from her bedroom clad in her training leathers. She'd affixed her hair into its usual braid and already donned her worn brown boots.

"Of course," I replied.

I held the door open for her and we ambled outside. I set off toward the path that would lead us up to the training yard and turned back to see her staring at me confused.

"We aren't flying today?" She asked.

*Crystal save me.* The knowledge that she wanted to be near me again, in my arms. It was almost enough to test my resolve.

"I thought we could walk today, Little Wildfire," I replied.

"Oh, okay." Her voice was laced with disappointment.

"Come on, I promise to take you flying after today's lesson," I said, motioning her towards me.

Her eyes lit up, and I loved seeing her happy. It was so rare these days, it seemed as though something was always troubling her. Part

of me wondered if it was to do with her being so far from home, and the other part of me was thankful she was away from those that held such hatred for our kind in their hearts. I flashed her a quick smile and she took that first step forward.

“Promise?” She asked hopefully, running to my side.

“Promise,” I replied, bumping her shoulder with my own.

We began walking up the path in a comfortable silence and my world finally felt whole. Simply being in her presence brought me the deepest sense of contentment, a feeling that had my inner demons running for the hills. Though I still kept a watchful eye, the shadows, along with whoever was wielding them, hadn’t shown themselves in weeks, but I was still aware of their possible presence here.

“So can I assume you’ll be at the celebration?” She asked, breaking the silence and looking up at me with curious eyes.

“Of course,” I mused. “Perhaps I’ll see you in another dimly lit corridor.”

She barked out a laugh. “I think I’ll avoid skulking around the palace this time. Thanks for the offer though.”

“Ah too bad,” I began, grinning wildly. “Khisfire is truly a magical place. You’ll find the interior much more gothic in nature than Antheia Palace, lined with red and black features at every turn. The ballroom was designed to host events, you’ll find me on one of the balconies. Should you decide you’d like to go *skulking about the palace* as you put it.”

She seemed to consider my words for a moment. The corner of her lip upturned into little more than a smirk before she spoke again.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Overgrown Lizard,” She teased, gently elbowing my ribs.

“And here I thought we were past the insults,” I retorted.

“Well, I figured it was time to give you a little pet name. Since you’re so insistent on calling me Little Wildfire,” she said with that same smirk from before.

Her fire was showing and I wanted to devour it. I wanted to claim this temptress for my own, to show her exactly how sweet life could be if she simply embraced her Dragonian nature. But I couldn’t. Not while she was still vowed to another. My thoughts brought me back to reality and my mood soured.

“I’ll deal with it for now,” I replied flatly.

Silence built between us again as we stepped into the yard. She took up her usual place on the ground and started stretching. I sat beside her and went through the motions, not really needing to as I’d already done one rotation of them this morning before fetching her.

“So when is Kyllan coming to visit?” I asked, attempting some sort of small talk to break the silence.

She looked at me nervously. “Um, tomorrow actually. I know that’s rather early and I hope it’s okay.”

*Fuck. I thought I’d have more time, oh well at least I wouldn’t be here.* “Of course. I’ll be away at the palace helping my father ready for the celebration, so if you need anything you’ll have to track down Kallus or Knox.”

“Not Kiira?” She asked, cocking her head.

“No, she’ll be busy spending silver leaf on a new gown for the occasion,” I chuckled.

Kiira always dressed to impress for these events. Last Winter Solstice she’d managed to find a gown that glittered each time she moved and was the same shade of red as her hair and wings. Knox was enamored with her the entire evening, though I imagine that’s the effect she was hoping to have on him.

“Ah. I should have known,” she replied a bit too flatly.

“What is it, Little Wildfire?” I asked as we ambled to our feet.

“Nothing, a bit silly really.” She blushed, looking down at her feet.

I reached out and took her chin in my hand, resting my thumb just under her bottom lip and tilted her head upward.

“Your feelings are not silly, Asena. Tell me what it is, so that I may fix it if I’m able,” I said, releasing my hold on her.

She bit her lip nervously. “I don’t have a dress.”

“What?” I asked.

“For the celebration. I was set to go to Soleia tomorrow with Eirian to get a new one, but with Kyllan’s visit I won’t have time. So I won’t be going to the welcoming celebration,” she said sheepishly.

“You wanted to go?” I asked, surprised. I tried to quickly tame the look of shock I felt cross my face.

She shook her head. "I did, though I suppose it doesn't matter much now."

"I suppose not. I'm sorry, Little Wildfire," I said sympathetically.

She stood there awkwardly, then dropped her gaze back to her feet. I could feel her sense of disappointment washing over me in waves. I needed to take her mind off the celebration and get to why we were here in the yard this early.

"Let's begin today's lesson shall we?" I asked.

"Please!" She said enthusiastically.

I watched as she settled into the offensive position and began the breathing technique, the motions coming naturally to her. Then just as she had yesterday, she stood with her arms to her sides, her forearms and palms upturned and focused on calling upon her power. I stood there watching her, her brow furrowing in frustration as she tried and failed over and over to produce flame in her palm. The cuff on my wrist burned hot against my skin as she warred with her own mind, calling me to help her, just as it had yesterday. Though just as I had then, I remained with my feet planted firmly in front of her.

Contentment settled across her face and flame erupted from her palms. Her eyes shot open and she looked at me with rage in her eyes. I felt her anger before she opened her mouth to speak, though I didn't know why she was angry with me.

"Why did you do that?" Asena scoffed.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, Little Wildfire," I responded, confused by her accusation.

"Why do you keep ripping my power from within me? I will never learn to call upon it on my own if you continue to bring it to the surface for me," she explained.

"Allow me to assure you I've done no such thing. The cuff on my wrist beckoned me too, but I remained rooted here where you see me now." My voice came out rough as I tried to put the pieces together.

"So it wasn't you who placed your hand on my shoulder and reached down into my well of power and pulled it to the surface?" She questioned, narrowing her eyes at me.

"No one placed their hand on your shoulder, Asena," I said, frowning.

I looked at her curiously, assessing her. Was this unseen force the reason the cuff beckoned me toward her? My gut churned with worry not just for my Little Wildfire, but for my realm as well. I had the distinct feeling that the shadows hadn't left, they'd shifted and had been lying dormant, waiting for something or someone to latch onto. The burning sensation in my chest told me they'd found it in the female standing before me, but I needed to be sure.

"Asena, this is very important. I need you to describe to me everything you felt, in detail," I requested, my voice firm and unwavering.

"Am I in danger?" She asked, her voice quaking slightly, betraying the tough exterior she liked to portray.

I shook my head. "I can't be sure until I know everything."

"Okay." She took a deep breath and began. "I was standing here, just like yesterday during training with the unit, and focused on my power. Focused on pulling my fire to the surface from within my well of power. It wouldn't come, but I could feel something *else* alongside it, something that was cold and foreign. I pushed the thoughts of it aside and returned my focus to the warmth I felt at the bottom of that well and willed it to show itself. It still wouldn't budge. Then I felt a warm hand on my shoulder, I felt its warmth spread throughout me and rip my power from the bottom of that well. When I opened my eyes, flames danced in my hands. I thought it'd been you."

I turned her words over in my mind. There was another source of power living within her, but it hadn't awakened, why? I decided to keep that bit of info to myself for now and focus on the more immediate threat. There was an unseen force at work here and I got the feeling that somehow the shadows had evolved. That whomever was wielding them had become more adept and the thought terrified me. How was I to lead an army against a force we couldn't see?

"Asena, listen to me. If you feel the hand again today I need you to alert me somehow. I cannot be certain, but I believe this to be the work of the shadow wielder," I said, my voice lowered.

Her eyes widened and a small gasp escaped her. She clasped a hand over her mouth and took several calming breaths as she searched my eyes for answers I could not give her. Finally her hand fell and she shook her head in disbelief.

"But shadow magic was outlawed years ago. How is it back?" She asked in a hushed tone, looking around as she spoke to make

sure no one was eavesdropping.

I ran my hands over my hair, resting them at the base of my neck before letting them drop to my side. “I’m not certain. I saw the first hints of it one year ago. My previous commander was driven mad by them and had to be sent to the Isle of Light to see the healers. He still remains there today. They’ve shown themselves here and there since then, but never like this. I fear the wielder of this magic has become more adept in their casting.”

“Ryker you don’t think that other power is shadow magic do you?” She asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“We won’t know what it is until you can awaken it somehow, but I do not believe it is shadow magic. It is very uncommon to be able to wield more than one element, Asena. You mustn’t tell anyone about this, not even Kyllan. Promise me this, Little Wildfire,” I pleaded, hoping she understood the importance of my request.

She looked at me hesitantly, but her eyes had the glimmer of understanding. “I promise.”

*Good girl.*

“If you would like, I can look into a way to awaken your other power. Though I feel it would be most beneficial if we focused on learning to gain control of your fire element first. Then we can awaken the other, if you want,” I offered.

“I’m not sure I want to awaken it. I’d just like to know what it is,” she admitted.

I began pacing as we talked. The realization setting in that because of the shadows, I may not be able to uphold my vow to her. That simply wouldn’t do. I’d have to mold her into a force to be reckoned with. And I’d need to tell the others. *Mother above, help me.* Kiira would slaughter me for not telling her sooner and Kallus and Knox would be equally as worried as I was. Then there was Father, who knew the ugly truth of it all. I’m sure he wouldn’t be pleased to learn the shadows had changed.

“I’ll see what I can find in the palace libraries when I’m there tomorrow. If you need me while I’m away, simply send a burst of heat at your cuff. I’ll feel it and come back for you. For now, let’s get some breakfast. You’ll need your strength for today’s lesson,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

“Thank you Ryker, truly. Though if I need you, I’ll just send a wolf letter. You’ll know it when you see it.” She laughed. “Now, can



you fly me to breakfast, Overgrown Lizard?”

I chuckled and said, “Anything for you, Little Wildfire. Come here and hang on tight.”

I scooped her up in my arms and held her close, as if she was the most precious thing in this world. My wings expanded behind me as I shot into the air, soaring high above the grounds. I swung wide of the cafeteria and gave her a view of the grounds in their entirety. My gaze dropped to her face and I took in the wonder that filled her eyes. I knew right then, I wanted to be the one to teach her to fly on her own. Then I wanted to be the one flying next to her as she discovered everything Vekroth had to offer, that it too was truly a place of beauty.

# CHAPTER



## 45

### *Asena*

The metal bed frame creaked loudly as I collapsed onto the worn mattress that adorned it. My body was left tired and aching after today's lessons. I could only hope that my muscles would get used to the additional torment I was putting them through. Currently they were screaming in agony despite the hot bath I'd soaked in after dinner. I was thankful that I could rest over the next three days as we wouldn't have training again until two days after the celebration. I let those thoughts ease my mind and tried to drift off.

I tossed and turned for the better portion of the night, unable to sleep with the weight of Kyllan's impending visit looming over me. The ebony metal cuff pulled heavily against my wrist, who would have thought a simple vow to ensure my safety would warrant a visit so early? Surely Kyllan would see there was nothing more to the vow between Ryker and I. That I'd only agreed to it once I learned he would be training my unit, knowing I wouldn't be able to gain control of my magik with the constant worry of my Commander waiting to strike. Though, it seemed Ryker had nothing to gain from the vow, so why had he suggested it? That thought wore heavy on my mind as I finally drifted off to sleep.

*"Wait here, I'll be right back. I just need to fetch something for you from the training shed," he said, his blue eyes full of hope and happiness.*

*He turned and walked off toward the circular cabin at the center of the grounds, just off the edge of the training ring. His wings were on display as I watched him disappear beyond the door to the small shed. I*

*hopped up from where I sat on the hard ground and began moving through the stances, focusing on my breathing as I moved.*

*Footsteps sounded behind me and I whirled around expecting to see him only to be met with two hooded figures. NO! It couldn't be, this isn't happening, the vow in the eyes of the Mother wouldn't allow it. Yet, darkness descended upon me all the same. Fear threatened to immobilize me as I began to run. Get to him, he can save you. I thought to myself. He promised he would keep you safe.*

*A high pitched laugh sounded beside me as the more slender of the two figures latched onto me, dragging me away from the cabin to the edge of the yard. I broke free from their grasp and ran, smacking into a wall of nothingness. Turning I ran again and again and again, all to no avail.*

*"I'm going to get my retribution, and you, little wolf are the key," The taller figure spoke as they began to pull back their hood to reveal a faceless figure.*

*"You're finally mine. I always knew I'd have you," a low voice growled behind me.*

*The second figure pulled their hood back to reveal a second faceless head. Who was behind this threat? I didn't have time to process that thought as the familiarity of the training grounds disappeared and I found myself in a dank poorly lit cellar. Chains hung from the wall beside me and rows of cells lined the back wall.*

*"Secure her in place. We don't need this one getting loose," the taller figure barked at the smaller one.*

*They glided on shadows over to me and placed the thick metal cuffs around my wrists. I thrashed and tried to fight them off but it was to no avail. The cuffs seemed to be blocking my magik somehow. I let out a wail of desperation, hoping someone would hear me. The more lithe of the figures seemed to wield the shadows that surrounded them as they raised a hand, throwing them at me, wrapping around my throat like a pair of hands to stop my screams. I panicked and began flailing violently as I tried to break free, to gain my ability to breathe back, but it was to no avail. I remained trapped there, with only a silent prayer that someone would come free me.*

I jolted upright in bed, the feeling of hands around my throat all too real. My flesh felt hot to the touch and I tried to pull my magik back in as Ryker had begun teaching me earlier after today's lesson. The door burst open a moment later and he was at my side in an instant, perched on the edge of the double bed.

"How did you know?" I asked with wide eyes, turning to him.

“The vow, you must have heated the cuff at some point. What happened, Little Wildfire?” He asked, brushing a tendril of loose hair behind my ear.

“It was exactly the same as last time, though instead of you and Kiira they were faceless,” I said, my voice just above a whisper. “They wanted to kill me, I felt the shadows hands at my throat. It was so much more real than they’ve been in the past.”

He furrowed his brow as concern spread across his face. “Have you spoken to anyone else about your night visions before?”

I nodded hesitantly. “My parents and Kyllan know of them, and Lady Selene. Though here, I have only confided in you.”

“Would you be willing to speak with the legion’s healer about them?” His tone was cautious as he spoke, as if afraid he would offend me with his suggestion.

“I suppose so. I was supposed to begin meeting with Lady Selene about them after I was Awakened, but things changed once I became a Dragonian.” I sighed and rubbed sleepily at my eyes.

He wrapped a cautious arm around me, ensnaring me in the comfort of his warmth. I leaned into that comfort, unwilling to fight it for the moment. The fear I’d felt upon waking had been too much, and if this male wanted to provide safety in his arms then I’d take him up on it. For tonight at least. I yawned and repositioned myself against him as he sat there, leaning against the headboard. My arm slid across his chest and he stroked it lightly, lulling me back to sleep.

His fingertips brushed the leather bracelet my parents had given me during my birthday dinner. I’d worn it for so long I’d forgotten to remove it when I came here, I guess a part of me was feeling homesick.

“What’s this?” He asked curiously, his gaze drifting down to the golden stag.

I looked up at him and replied, “it was a gift from my parents for my birthday. Even though I’m mad at them, I can’t bring myself to remove it yet.”

He smiled sweetly at me, pulling me in a little tighter as he said, “it’s okay to miss them.”

“Even if I’m mad at them?” I asked.

“Even then. Now sleep, Little Wildfire. I’ll watch over you. We can continue our talks tomorrow,” he said quietly, stroking my hair softly.



I stretched a sleepy hand across the mattress, surprised to find it empty. Ryker must have slipped out after I'd fallen asleep. I sat up and stretched my arms and wings wide, then padded down the hall to the kitchen. There I found a dove letter waiting for me along with a bit of parchment that held unfamiliar handwriting neatly scrawled upon it.

*Little Wildfire,*

*I had to slip out early this morning and head off to Khisfire Palace. Enjoy your day with Kyllan. Send for me if you need to, but remember Kallus and Knox are still at the camp as well.*

*-Your Overgrown Lizard*

I couldn't help but chuckle at his acceptance of that ridiculous nickname I'd given him. I placed the note from Ryker back on the counter and tapped the head of the dove so that its contents could be revealed.

*Ase,*

*Ezra talked me down a bit and I realize you may be expecting the worst with my visit today. Lady Reyna will be dispelling me just outside of the gates after breakfast. I can't wait to spend the day with you my love.*

*-Kyllan*

Relief flooded me as I read those words. I quickly dressed in the outfit that was delivered to me the day I left Herbexia, not wanting Kyllan to see me in my Dragonian training leathers. I pulled on my worn boots and left my cabin, heading for the cafeteria. I made a beeline for the bacon and coffee before taking my seat across from Eirian.

"I didn't think I'd be seeing you today. With your impending visitor I mean," she chirped.

"He will be here after breakfast," I replied. "Though I wish I could come with you, it seems I'll be skipping the celebration after all. Can't say I'm too torn up about it."

She laughed at that and I took a sip of the delicious nectar that filled my thermos.

"So he's just here for today then?" She asked curiously, taking a bite of her toast.

I took a bite of bacon and shook my head in confirmation.

“You’re sure you don’t want me to get you anything? Then you could still come to the celebration,” she asked hopefully.

“No. It’s okay, I appreciate your offer, but I’m okay skipping it this year. Perhaps I’ll attend the next,” I murmured.

Though the thought of the celebration had initially been quite daunting, I was slightly warming up to the idea of a night with the few friends I’d made here. I finished off the few bits of bacon left on my plate and rose from my seat to refill my coffee.

“Want some?” I offered.

“Please! I’m leaving for Soleia after this, I could use it,” she replied, smiling warmly at me.

I quickly filled our thermoses and returned to the table, stopping just long enough to drop Eirian’s mug off and bid her farewell for the day. My feet carried me toward the front gate of the camp before I realized where I was headed. Apparently I was more inclined to see Kyllan than I thought, though with the letter I’d received from him this morning I was not quite as anxious about it.

The sound of boots scuffling against the dirt grew louder as I approached the gate, causing me to quicken my pace. I cast a hand out in front of me and willed my power to unlock the gate but it was to no avail. *Why had this been so easy before?* I wondered as I stood there, feeling powerless. A moment later Kiira appeared beside me.

“You okay, Red?” She asked with a curious expression.

“I can’t get the gate to open. I actually haven’t been able to produce my flame very easily at all since that day I arrived here with you,” I murmured sheepishly.

She placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. “It’ll happen. Just give it time. Now let’s get your *friend* in here.”

I didn’t miss the way her voice hitched at the word friend, but chose to ignore it. Instead I watched as she cast a single flare at the gate, causing the magik to disperse and the expansive metal swung open. Kyllan’s smile warmed me instantly, he took a hesitant step forward through the gates, almost as if he expected to burst into flame the instant he crossed into the camp.

He left me no time to process his arrival as he rushed towards me, scooping me up in his arms and swung me around. His lips came crashing down on mine an instant later and I was lost to the world around me. I smiled as he pulled away and rested his forehead against mine.

“I missed you, Ase,” he breathed.

Kiira cleared her throat next to us. I turned to see her still standing there with her arms crossed over her chest and blushed.

“Ah yes, um, Kyllan this is Kiira. She is Commander Ryker’s second and one of the captains of the Legion. Kiira, this is my, well, my Kyllan,” I said, not really sure what Kyllan was to me these days.

“A pleasure to meet you, Kiira,” Kyllan said, dipping his head as he acknowledged her. Though, I didn’t miss the way his lip curled in distaste when he thought no one was looking.

“Likewise. Red, I’m off to the capital. If you need anything Kallus and Knox are staying behind to make sure the camp stays intact. You’ll find the Legion can be quite *restless* when their Commander is out,” she said before sauntering through the gates and casting flame at them once more causing them to lock behind her.

I took Kyllan’s hand in mine and led him through the camp, pointing up the mountainside to where we trained, then off in the distance where the cafeteria was located. Slowly we found our way back to my cabin, I opened the door and stepped inside, beaming wildly at him. I couldn’t believe he was here, that I had a lifeline, even if just for a short time.

He followed me inside and looked around. His eyes fell upon the empty bookshelf and he frowned.

“Ase, where are your books? Any of your things really,” Kyllan inquired, looking about the bleak cabin in distaste.

“In Herbexia. Probably still in the trunk I packed if I’m being honest,” I shrugged.

He turned to face me and gave me a look that let me know he knew there was more to the story. I sighed and flopped into an armchair in the small sitting area just off the kitchen. Kyllan took his place on the couch across from me as I began.

“They’ve been hiding things from me my entire life, Ky. You know as well as anyone that they never spoke of Zander’s death or the shadow that surrounded it. Now it turns out they’re hiding my heritage as well. Mother comes from Vekroth, and Father from Mystaria. Beyond that I know nothing of their families,” I explained.

“Ase, I’m sure they have their reasons.” He began, but I cut him off.

“Don’t you dare take up for them. What reason would they have to keep their child from her family, Ky? Especially one that she could finally get to know.” I lowered my voice as I spoke those last words.

He patted the cushion next to him, calling me over to sit with him, but I remained rooted in my seat. We had more to discuss before I let him behind my walls again. The ones I’d carefully crafted my first night

here when I feared for my life and felt more lonely than I had my entire life.

“Ase, come here.” He beckoned.

I shook my head. “No, I’d rather stay here until we are finished talking.”

He tsked and ran a hand through his perfectly styled blonde hair. It had gotten darker since he’d Awakened, though his disposition had as well it seemed. There was something amiss with the way he was acting, almost sinister. I was sure my mind had to be playing tricks on me.

“Why did Lady Reyna bring you?” I inquired, desperate to change the subject.

“She had some business with Lord Elias and is one of the few in Rastia that know of our vow. When she offered, I couldn’t say no. Eventually I’ll learn to dispel or fly here. Until then I’ll have her bring me,” he explained, picking the dirt beneath his nails, not bothering to look at me as he spoke.

I silently wondered what she was doing with Elias and if that was the reason Ryker had to be at Khisfire today.

“So shall we get to the reason you’re here?” I asked, sitting up in my chair.

“You really still are the same Ase I know and love, aren’t you? Never one to beat around the bush.” He chuckled, his eyes darkening. “That’s not the only reason I’m here but let’s get on with it. Why would you vow yourself to another male?” His tone changed, becoming more serious.

“My night visions. They showed me the face of who was behind them, though I feel now it was my imagination running wild. I’m not sure what to believe anymore, they’ve changed so much over these past months,” I murmured, almost ashamed.

“You’re not making any sense,” he said, his eyes fixed on my wings before they flicked back to mine.

“In my visions, the shadow figure pulls back their hood to reveal Ryker. Or at least it did until I accepted his vow never to harm me or order my harm. Now they remain faceless again,” I shook my head.

He ran a hand over his face and leaned forward, his arms resting across his knees.

“Help me understand here because this still doesn’t make sense to me. You allowed the male who wants to kidnap you to vow your safety?” His voice came out too calm, too even tempered.



I took a shaky breath, trying to calm myself. *Kyllan would never harm you, not intentionally.* I reminded myself.

“He is not the monster that he is painted to be, Kyllan. Ryker would sooner set himself on fire than see anyone in this realm harmed,” I said calmly.

“Is that why your cabin reeks of him?” He asked darkly.

I was taken aback at his directness. This was not the Kyllan I’d come to love over my short lifetime with him.

“What has gotten into you?” I asked, staring at him with bewildered eyes.

“I am the same as I have always been Asena,” he replied, voice low and hard.

I shook my head in response. He rose to his feet and whirled on me before I could speak again. He leaned down, grasping hold of the arms of my chair.

“Have you let him get so close that you are blinded by what he is? By what his people are?” His words dripped with venom as they spewed from his lips.

I held up my hand in response, not wanting to hear anymore of his hatred for my kind. If he couldn’t tolerate them, then how could he love me?

“Stop. You are not only insulting my Commander and my friends but you are insulting me. Or is my appearance not enough to remind you that I am now a Dragonian, or half breed as the rest of the kingdom likes to call us,” I seethed.

Kyllan clenched his teeth, his jaw ticking the longer he stared at me.

“No, Asena. I have not forgotten that fate so cruelly ripped you from me and turned you into *this*.” He gestured at my form with a disgusted look on his face.

That’s when it struck me, he was only here out of obligation to our vow. He stopped loving me the moment I’d been Awakened and I’d been a fool to think otherwise. Though, he sure hadn’t acted like it when he made love to me in the cave. Perhaps he’d been using me all along, I would never know for sure. For now, I just wanted him gone.

“Kyllan if you cannot accept me then release me from my vow to you,” I pleaded.

I could feel the tears building in my eyes, threatening to fall as I awaited his response.

“I release you from your vow to me, Asena,” His voice came out terse and unforgiving.

I felt my face fall in utter shock. This person who I’d known most of my life, who had fallen in love with me, who had sworn to protect me and love me was turning his back on me. My eyes met his, which were staring cold daggers at me. His upper lip was curled in disgust and his teeth were gritted together. *This is not my Kyllan anymore*, I thought to myself, sadly.

“I release you from your vow to me Kyllan,” I said softly. “Now get out.”

He walked over and placed a folded bit of parchment on my counter and left without another word. My heart broke into pieces inside my chest as I replayed those last moments over and over again inside my head. If he was truly so disgusted by me, by what I’d become, why had he come here? Why did he want to vow to see me regularly? Why not let me go then? There were so many questions swirling around in my head that I feared I would never get the answers to.

I glanced down at my wrist where the cuff that once tied me to Kyllan was still seated. Angry, I removed it, no longer wanting to be associated with someone that had so much hatred in his heart for my realm. *My realm*. The tears stopped and I laughed, it seemed I was finally accepting my fate. I threw the cuff on the counter next to the letter Kyllan left and bolted from the cabin, tapping my pendant as I went causing my training leathers to slide into place.

I searched the grounds over and over. It wasn’t until I hiked up the long trail that led to the training yards that I saw the familiar wisps of stark white hair and smiled. Of course the captains would be sparring on their off day. Knox saw me and halted before nodding my way causing Kallus to turn around.

“I was wondering if you two might be up for a short training session.” I smiled. “But it seems you beat me to it.”

“Isn’t your *friend* visiting today?” Kallus said coldly.

I shook my head. “He was, but I sent him away. He won’t be coming back. No, I don’t want to talk about it. I just want to focus on controlling my magik and anything else you two might want to teach me.”

I needed somewhere to put the rage building inside of me. I needed an outlet. So why not use my emotions to my benefit for once?

Knox shrugged. “Alright, Red. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

I fell into the offensive stance Ryker taught us and focused all of my energy on calling upon my magik. To my surprise, it answered. My eyes

burst open and I cheered silently to myself. I'd finally done it. Flame danced in my palms and this time, there wasn't a phantom hand clinging to my shoulder. Maybe I needed to let go of the past to move forward, to succeed here.

We worked the rest of the afternoon on me dropping and recalling my power. Each time it came, without hesitation. I managed to mold it into a perfectly spherical ball that we tossed back and forth amongst the three of us, adding a bit of magik to make it larger each time we caught and threw it. Neither of them questioned what happened between Kyllan and me. Instead they focused on praising me for a job well done and adjusting my stance or the way I added flame to the already produced magik.

"I should have known I would find you two here," Kiira called as she landed beside the yard. "But I didn't expect to see you here, Red. Where's your friend?"

Before I could say anything on the subject, Knox spoke up. "She sent him away, doesn't want to talk about it," he quickly added, seeing the spark of curiosity illuminating Kiira's eyes, and continued, "and wanted to practice controlling her magik."

I mouthed a silent thank you to him.

"She's done quite well. I expect we will see great things from her," Kallus added, nodding at me and winking reassuringly.

Kiira cast me a confused glance but said nothing on the subject. "Very well then. You three best come on if you want dinner. Kallus, can you carry Asena down?"

He nodded then walked over to me, scooping me up in his arms and shot into the sky. I'd barely had time to acclimate to being in the air again before we landed just outside the cafeteria. The four of us walked in together and Kiira led me to their table in the center of the room. All eyes fell on us as I took my place beside her, where Ryker normally sat.

"Is this okay?" I asked, unsure of how to feel sitting here of all places.

"I invited you girl. Let any of them question your being at this table. You have earned your place here today," she stated, giving me a knowing look.

Knox appeared a moment later carrying a smorgasbord of food for the four of us. We fell into casual conversation about Kiira's trip to the shopping districts but she wouldn't give us the first glimmer of what she'd found there. Only that we would all be surprised by it. She cast a smile in my direction every now and then, seeming to understand what I was trying my best to hide, that behind my mask of indifference I was

angry and hurt by the one person who was always supposed to be there for me. By the person I'd thought to be my mate.

# CHAPTER



## 46

*Ryker*

Sleeping in my room at the palace felt foreign. I'd tossed and turned the better portion of the night, craving the comforts of the cabin I now called home. The room here was rather large with three tall windows adorning the north facing wall, long red curtains billowed against their frames as the brisk morning air crept its way inside. The plush king size bed I layed in hadn't let out so much as the first creak at my movements. It was too quiet, much like everything else here.

A soft knock sounded against my door and I groaned. I pulled on a pair of pants and moved to open the door. Hadley, one of the castle service staff and an old friend, stood before me. She and I became rather close over the years after father was named High Lord when Ravi renounced the throne. Her jade wings were almost too small in proportion to her body, but still they flitted happily behind her as she saw me.

"Hello my old friend." Her sing-song voice was music to my ears.

I relaxed instantly, the comforts of one of my oldest friends brought me such joy. I momentarily forgot all that plagued my mind. Mother above, it was good to see her, and to see her doing so well after so much sadness had been thrust upon her.

"Come in, come in," I said, ushering her inside.

I walked over to the small black settee situated near the fireplace and sat down, gesturing for her to take the place in the blood red armchair across from me. I cast a wayward hand out toward the white marbled fireplace and brought the flame back to life that had been threatening to die out.

“How are you sweet girl, when did you get back?” I asked, hoping for an honest answer.

Her smile faltered slightly and I took in her hazel eyes. They were no longer shrouded by the sickness that once ran through her. I was hopeful that her trip to the healers on the Isle of Light had truly rid her of the curse placed upon her years ago.

“I got back just three days ago and I’m rather well,” she answered brightly.

“And the curse, is it truly gone?” I inquired, not daring to take my eyes off of her.

Her mousy brown hair bobbed as she shook her head. “It is! I still don’t know how the healers managed it,” she exclaimed before lowering her voice. “I only wish they could have helped father before it was too late.”

“I’m afraid by the time we knew what happened it was too late, Hadley.” I spoke softly, trying to reassure her. “I am happy that you are no longer plagued by them, hopefully the healers will be able to recreate this miracle in the future. I fear the shadows are back.”

Her eyes widened in fear. “No. It can’t be. The High Council banned all use of shadow magic after Edmar fled!” Her voice took on a slightly higher octave as she breathed the words out worriedly.

I shook my head. “Whoever is wielding them doesn’t care it seems.”

“Does Elias know?” She asked firmly.

“I informed him upon my arrival yesterday. He is less than pleased and promises to banish the one controlling them with hellfire. Lady Reyna came yesterday and met with him, he most likely informed her about them then as well,” I said.

“Ah yes. I remember seeing her, they’re still here. In fact I believe Lady Reyna is in your father’s study now,” she replied.

“They?” I asked.

“Yes. There was a blonde dark fae male that arrived just after lunch yesterday looking for her. I escorted him to her room, though now he is in a room of his own. He was quite unpleasant.” She shivered as she remembered the encounter.

I was frozen, trapped in my own thoughts as my mind raced with possibilities. There was only a slim possibility that male was Kyllan. But if it was him, why was he here and not with my Little Wildire?

“Ryker?” Hadley snapped.

“I’m sorry, Hadley. I’m afraid my attention was focused on runaway thoughts,” I apologized.

“That’s quite alright. I was just saying how that male was very off putting. His whole aura seemed *off*. Dark even,” she said, her eyes focused on the fireplace, shadows and firelights dancing in them.

I sighed, resigning myself to the fact that the dark fae she was describing couldn’t possibly be the bright eyed, cheery male I’d met at the Solstice dinner. But then who was it?

“Hadley, would you mind escorting me to his rooms?” I asked, standing and sliding my leathers into place.

“Sure, right this way,” she said, leading the way out of my room and down the sweeping corridor.

Our footsteps echoed against the black marbled floor and walls as we walked, the red silk draperies along the walls doing little to absorb the sound. We rounded the corner and found ourselves in the visitors wing of the palace. The floor here was covered by a long blood red rug featuring an intricate silver design woven into it.

“He’s just through this door,” Hadley said, pausing just outside a tall white oak door.

I knocked but no one answered. I pushed the door open to find the room empty. The bedding was ruffled as if someone had indeed slept there but it seemed the mystery visitor was nowhere in sight. I said my goodbyes to Hadley and set off for father’s study. Voices drifted toward me as I approached, apparently father hadn’t told her of the shadows yesterday. I suddenly found myself thankful to be able to partake in conversation with a member of the High Council.

“Elias, you must be mistaken. The shadows were extinguished when Edmar fled from these lands.” Lady Reyna’s voice reached my ears as I approached the door.

“I’m afraid not. I’ve seen it for myself, and now so has my Commander,” Father declared.

“Ryker was newly awakened during that time, is he *sure* of what he is seeing now?” She questioned, her voice full of doubt, and tinged with fear.

I pushed through the slightly ajar door and strode to stand beside father.

“Positive. They are being drawn to a female recruit specifically, though she seems to be fighting them off fairly well,” I confirmed.

“Should we be worried about her?” Father asked with a raised eyebrow.

I shook my head. “No, her disgust for shadow magic is equal to ours.”

“Very well. Reyna, I trust you will keep an eye on your realm as we will ours. We will need to inform the others as quickly as we can,” Father suggested.

“That we agree on Elias. I will inform Lysa of the situation upon my return home. From there we can inform the other realms,” Lady Reyna said resolutely.

“I’d like to travel to Herbexia myself. If neither of you are opposed,” I requested.

“I don’t see the harm in it.” Lady Reyna shrugged.

Father cast me a weary glance as if he knew there was an underlying reason for my want to visit them. He knew I hated playing courtier, but I doubted he would argue against my going as he believed I needed the practice for the day I would occupy Vekroth’s throne.

“Thank you. I’m afraid I do have one last request. Given the history between our realms, I believe it best that you speak with Lord Castian as well as Lord Rohan,” I suggested.

Father nodded beside me as Lady Reyna spoke once again. “I’ll have to agree there. We wouldn’t want to start another war because those pups and that icicle take this news poorly,” she said, somewhat sardonically. I had to hand it to Reyna, she had a witty sense of humor.

I burst into laughter at her candor. It was so refreshing to be in the presence of one of the High Court without them putting on airs. Perhaps sitting upon the throne wouldn’t be as horrid as I imagined it to be.

“My lords and lady pardon my intrusion. May I speak with you a moment Lady Reyna?” Hadley spoke, her head poked through the door.

Lady Reyna excused herself and went into the hall to speak with Hadley.

“So this female that seems to be attracting the shadows, you’re sure there’s nothing to worry about?” Father asked once more, his face twisted in concern.

I held up my wrist, showing him the cuff placed there. “Positive.”

“Son you didn’t,” he said with a slight gasp, his tone hushed.

“I only vowed to protect her and bring her no harm. I will not justify my actions on this to you. Not until I am certain of things myself. You entrusted the safety of the legion to me, so trust me on this decision as well,” I stated, challenging him.



He waved me off just as Lady Reyna reentered the room. The sound of her heels clacking as she walked across the floor was muffled by the swooshing of the fabric of her long, sweeping gown that was a vivid purple .

“Ryker, if you’ll excuse us, I need a moment alone with Lord Elias,” she said, coming to a stop just beside me.

“Of course. Father, I will make sure the preparations for tonight are in order,” I said, bowing my head slightly at him.

I turned on my heel and walked the short distance back to the door and slipped out of the room. The hall was empty short of the echoes that sounded from the grand ballroom carrying throughout the palace, growing louder as I edged closer. The ballroom truly was magnificent, I stood against the balcony above peering down to the floor below. Red and silver fabrics were draped across each opening in a criss-crossed swooping pattern, providing color against the inky palace walls and columns. A sense of comfort slipped around me at the familiarity of this spot. It is where I stood year after year gazing down at the legion and the newcomers to our land. Though, this year I’d hoped to change that, to become a part of the festivities. It now seemed my hope was squandered. Perhaps next year.

# CHAPTER



## 47

### *Asena*

After lunch I found myself in the training yard once again. Just as it had yesterday, my magik came each time I called it. I began taking it a bit farther, producing a flame, shaping it into a ball, then throwing it at the stone targets to the left of the field. Sweat beaded on my brow as I worked on my craft, determined to be ahead of the unit by the time training resumed in two days time. Though I'd decided that I would still maintain my lessons with Ryker. If I wanted to stay ahead, I'd need all the practice time I could get.

Thoughts of Kyllan and yesterday's events crept into my mind and my flame grew larger and hotter as my emotions flared. Why was he suddenly so callous towards me? He *knew* this isn't the fate I would have chosen for myself. I threw those balls of flame harder and faster until the stone targets became so charred the markings on them were unrecognizable.

"Well I wouldn't want to get on your bad side," Kallus chuckled behind me.

I jumped and spun around to face him, falling into a defensive position. My flames still flared in my palms and he held his hands up in surrender. I dropped my hands and extinguished my flame, smiling in spite of myself at the giant man before me feigning fear.

"Sorry. I guess that's becoming a habit," I apologized.

"That's not necessarily a bad thing. It's best to always be prepared and aware of your surroundings," he said, taking a few steps closer. "You're becoming quite adept with your magik."

I shrugged. "I suppose you're right, what are you doing here anyway? Don't you have a celebration to get ready for?" The question caused a pang in my chest as I thought about the party I'd miss out on.

"Kiira sent me to fetch you. We will be leaving shortly for the celebration, if you return to your cabin now you will still have time to ready yourself before we set off," he said flatly, his eyes roved over me, a smirk notching the right side of his mouth upward. "Though perhaps you should hurry. I assume a shower is in order."

"I've already told Ryker I'm not going, you can tell Kiira the same," I said firmly, then turned my attention back to the stone targets.

"Suit yourself, but when she drags you back to your cabin remember that I tried." He turned and shot into the air, toward the larger cabins that housed Ryker and his captains.

*Well if I was already in my cabin she couldn't drag me back there could she?* I let out a resigned sigh and headed back toward the small cabin I called my own. I flung the door open and padded down the hall to my bedroom, freezing in place once I crossed the threshold. There on the bed was a black box, identical to the one that awaited me when I awoke after the awakening.

Choosing to ignore it, I walked to the bathroom and turned on the hot water. A chill skipped across my skin as my leathers retreated leaving me bare against the stilted air within the cramped room. I stepped beneath the water and embraced the intoxicating heat from it. The box that lay on my bed weighed heavily on my mind as I washed myself. *Was my family watching me, and if so, would rejecting their gift upset them?*

I turned the water off and my head snapped up at the sound of the creaking floorboards within my cabin. The soft clicking of the door latching sounded shortly after and I crept out of the bathroom. I reached a hand up and slid my leathers into place, producing a flame in my right hand. I searched the cabin over and found it empty save for a second and third black box that lay on the bed. It seemed whoever had come here was no more than an errand boy sent to deliver packages. Regardless, I locked my door and moved a chair in front of it, just in case.

My leathers slid away once more as I returned to my bedroom, sliding on my undergarments I pulled from the bureau drawer there. Hesitantly I took the lid off the first box. Seated inside was a bejeweled black dress. I pulled it from the box and inspected it further. The top was cut to my form perfectly, jewels glittering in the soft light that peered in from the window across the room, the skirt was simple and had little shape. I placed it back into the box and removed the lid from the second box then pulled the dress from inside. The inky fabric seemed to

shimmer without the first bit of glitter, sequins or jewel upon it. I slid into the soft velour dress, the low back and plunging neckline a bit riskier than I would usually wear but I was feeling confident. I opened the smaller third box and found black strappy heels alongside a pair of new black leather boots. A smile pulled at the edges of my lips. It seemed I wouldn't have to continue wearing my well worn boots to training any longer. Anxious to see if they fit, I sat on the bed and pulled them on.

A knock sounded at the door just as I stood to admire them. I padded down the hall, moved the chair, and opened the door. Surprise overtook me at the sight of Kallus standing before me, donning a blood red velvet jacket atop a black shirt and pants.

"I see you heeded my warning," he chuckled.

"It seems that someone wants me to go to this celebration tonight," I replied. "This dress and another were left for me."

He smiled as though the fact that some stranger was in my cabin didn't phase him at all.

"Well I hope you aren't wearing those shoes, Kiira would have your neck," he said, gesturing toward the boots on my feet.

I laughed nervously. "No, I have something else in mind for these. I'm just finishing up getting ready if you'd like to come in."

He nodded in response. "I sent Kiira and Knox on ahead, knowing that you might need a few extra moments to ready yourself."

The door clicked shut behind him and he looked almost too big to be in such a small space. *Had Ryker looked the same way here and I had not noticed it, was I that distracted by him?*

"I'll just sit here while you finish up," he said and I retreated to the bathroom.

I quickly swiped charcoal across my eyelid, creating a dark smokey look. I ran a brush through my hair, and decided to leave it down for the night, letting it cascade in waves down the middle of my back between my wings. The bed creaked slightly as I sat on its edge and changed from the boots into the strappy heels provided for me by their purchaser, whom I was starting to think *wasn't* my family. I suspected Ryker was behind the three boxes that sat atop my mattress given the way Kallus didn't show concern over their arrival. I returned to the bathroom one last time, glancing in the mirror to inspect my appearance. Something was missing, but I couldn't place it. Then, I remembered the blood red color of Kallus's jacket and smiled. I pulled my lip stain out of the drawer and painted it on, smiling with satisfaction at the brilliant red color.

My heels sounded against the wooden floor as I walked back down the hall to where Kallus sat in the small living room. A glint caught my eye as I passed the kitchen and I turned my head toward it. Kyllan's vow cuff sat atop the unread letter, beckoning me forward.

"You look lovely, Red," Kallus spoke, his voice low and husky.

"Thanks," I replied. "Do you mind waiting just a bit longer? I'm afraid there's a bit of unfinished business here that will weigh on my mind if I don't give it my attention."

He eyed the cuff on the counter and nodded.

"Thank you," I said sincerely.

I reached for the letter, sliding it out from under the cuff. I unfolded it and was surprised to see Ezra's unfamiliar handwriting scrawled upon it.

*Asena,*

*I hope you are getting along well in Vekroth. Things here are well, different to say the least. Kyllan has become increasingly angrier and darker with each day that passes. I fear that he still blames the crystal for the fate it dealt the two of you. I will try to keep an eye on him for you. Write soon, I'm anxious to hear of news from Vekroth. Tell my brother hello for me, Kallus, Kiira and Ryker too.*

*-Ezra*

"Ezra says hello," I smirked looking up from the parchment.

"What?" He asked in surprise.

I shook the letter in my hand. "It's from Ezra. He says hello, and he's getting along okay in Rastia. Though, as if I didn't know now, Kyllan is having trouble *adjusting*." I could hear the bitterness in my voice as I spoke the last word.

"Can I see that?" Kallus asked, rising to his feet and crossing the room.

I nodded and handed the letter to him. His eyes roved over the page as he took the words in. He frowned, then looked from me to the letter and back again.

"What?" I snapped.

"Did he seem off to you when he visited?" Kallus asked, his voice low and stern.

"He seemed angry at the world. Angry at me for becoming what I am, like I had any control over it," I murmured, anger still fresh at the way Kyllan had spoken to me.

“I’ll send word to Commander Lysa, have her keep an eye on him. You may be upset with him but something tells me you don’t want him to continue down this path,” he offered.

“Thank you, Kallus. Shall we get going? I don’t want to be too late,” I replied, changing the subject.

I still wasn’t ready to talk about what happened with Kyllan. His hatred for my people hurt me in a way I couldn’t quite explain.

“Of course, and don’t worry about passing Ezra’s greetings along. I’ll take care of it, you just worry about enjoying yourself tonight. You’ve earned it.” he said, placing the letter back on the counter.

We stepped out into the crisp evening air and I became acutely aware of how much of my flesh was exposed. Without a word, Kallus scooped me into his arms and shot into the air. I kept my head tucked in tight against his chest, trying to shield my face from the wind that whipped around us.

“Almost there, Red. Take a look,” he shouted over the wind.

I turned my head just in time to see the lights of Soleia drawing closer. The city was breathtaking from this view. It was so different from Verena, the buildings here were made entirely of stone and metal, but were still beautiful in their own way. We landed just outside of the town which was alight with firelights that hung throughout the square. My eyes widened with joy at the beauty my new realm held. All I’d seen thus far was the desolate mountainside that held the training grounds. To know that cities such as this existed gave me hope for my new life.

Kallus extended his arm and pointed beyond the square to what I could only assume was Khisfire Palace. Large towers were carved into the obsidian palace, and though it was darker than the night itself light blossomed from within its walls.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathed, staring in awe at the magnificent black palace backdropping the town.

Kallus chuckled beside me. “Wait until you see the inside. Shall we?”

He extended an elbow, I slipped my hand into the crook of it and we began to walk toward the black, glowing palace.

# CHAPTER



# 48

*Ryker*

The celebration was in full swing by the time I made my entrance through the doorway at the far side of the upstairs balcony. I took a glass of sweet wine from one of the many waiters that carried trays throughout the ballroom. The thick fruity liquid ran over my tongue as I downed it in one go, the need to numb myself to the role I was set to play tonight growing with each passing moment. I sat the empty glass on a side table before making my descent into the room below.

Music bellowed from the corner where the orchestra sat, carrying out across the sea of Dragonians that were intertwined as they danced about the marble floor. Black banners hung on the far side of the room, adorned with a set of flaming red wings, the sigil of Vekroth. I smirked at the sense of pride that blossomed within me. The rest of the Kingdom may hold us in high disregard, but the true nature of our kind couldn't be denied. We were loyal to our own and our allies, to a fault at times.

I allowed my mind to wander to the legion and my Little Wildfire. As much as I hoped she would come, I knew that circumstance would not allow her presence here tonight. With the duty father thrust on me at the last minute, it was probably for the best that I remain without distraction. I spotted Knox and Kiira above and made my way up to them.

"I should have known you'd be the sparkliest creature in the room," I said curtly.

Knox choked back a laugh and quickly righted himself as Kiira scowled at him.

"Where's Kallus?" I asked, saving my brother from a tongue lashing.

“He had an errand to run, he’ll be here soon I’m sure,” Kiira smirked and drank deeply from her glass.

Knox shook his head and took a sip of his own wine. Kiira flashed me a smile that let me know she was up to something. A waiter passed by and I reached a hand out to procure yet another glass of wine that I was sure to need. I took a sip and turned my attention to the doors across the room below as they opened. Kallus strode in arm and arm with my Little Wildfire.

My mouth ran dry as I took her in. Her body was on display in that dark as night velvet dress. Two slits ran up the length of her legs to her hips on either side, causing the skirt to billow out as she walked. Her long red hair hung loose down her back swaying back and forth across her wings as she walked, causing her to shudder so slightly it was almost unnoticeable. *But I noticed.*

“Something wrong Ryker?” Kiira chuckled knowingly. “I thought you’d be pleased at her arrival, though I am surprised she chose *that* dress. I assumed she’d go with the safer option.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her. “There was another option?”

“One far less revealing and much more sparkly. Perhaps she’s got more dragon in her than she knows. I do have to say, she looks like fucking royalty in that gown,” she quipped.

*I couldn’t agree more, and perhaps one day she will be.* I thought to myself. Kallus shifted his gaze up to me when they made their way to the staircase leading up to the balcony where the three of us sat perched on the railing. Eirian squealed in excitement catching Asena’s attention just as she was about to begin her ascent. She turned and hugged Kallus before shooting across the room where Eirian called for her and Kallus ascended the stairs alone.

“Ryker, before you start in on me, know it was Kiira’s doing,” Kallus said, joining us on the balcony.

“I’m all too aware brother,” I said, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Thank the Mother for that,” he murmured. “By the way, Ezra wrote to Asena. He says hello and is getting along well there. Knox, if you haven’t yet, you should write to him, let him know how the family is doing.”

Knox smiled and jabbed a finger in Kiira’s direction, “this one brought supplies back from town today so I could write to him regularly. Apparently she had *several* plans in the works. Sorry she dragged you into it mate.”



Kiira laughed quietly beside us, clearly quite pleased with herself. Kallus swiped at her glass but she jerked it away at the last moment. I handed him my wine and went in search of a fresh one, leaving the three of them behind to view the party from above as we always had.

I made my descent into the room below and weaved carefully between the bodies that danced and swayed to and fro as the music played. I spotted a waiter and trailed after him, right until I found myself ensnared by the sight of her deep teal wings facing me. Mother above she was even more stunning up close, the back of that velour dress plunging down into a sharp v just above the base of her spine. I found myself drawn closer to her, the urge to reach out a hand and strum the flesh between her wings growing stronger. I wanted to play hopscotch along the freckles that dotted her spine, disappearing below the fabric of that damned dress. I wanted to wrap her in my arms and steal her away for myself, protecting her from the disappointment of the world.

Eirian nodded over her shoulder and she whirled around to face me. By the Crystal she was immaculate. Her blue eyes were an ocean I could swim in for the remainder of my eternal life and never tire of them.

“Good evening, Commander,” she spoke through vibrant red lips, eyes sparkling and cheeks flushed with excitement.

“You ladies look lovely this evening. I’m pleased to see you were able to attend, Asena. Perhaps you’ll save me that dance after all,” I said coolly.

She laughed nervously and cast a glance over her shoulder at Eirian, bringing her arms up to cross awkwardly over her stomach. My heart lurched at the sight of the red and black cuff atop her wrist.

“I’ll leave you ladies to it,” I said, taking my leave. Pausing to lean forward and whisper in Asena’s ear. “Should you decide that you’d like to go skulking about the castle, come find me first, I have a surprise for you.”

I watched the hollow of her throat as she swallowed the lump that had built there, then walked past them to where a waiter was making the rounds. My ears perked up as I took in their conversation.

“Want to tell me what that was about?” Eirian asked.

“It was nothing. He was just telling me how he hates these events,” Asena responded, her voice came out nervous and rushed.

“Sure. Well if *nothing* gets any hotter between the two of you, I’ll be sure to invite the water nymphs here to put the fire out,” Eirian said sardonically.

I chuckled to myself and retrieved a glass of wine then made my way up the left side of the room where I found Kiira dancing with Knox. He led her around the room, showcasing her in each movement as if she was a priceless work of art. My eyes drifted around the room taking in each member of the legion that attended the celebration.

Father's late arrival drew my attention, he entered the room from the grand staircase, donning a charcoal suit, shirt and tie. The dance floor cleared as he made his descent and his eyes flared as he saw me there, having already entered without him. I didn't need some grand entrance bullshit to remind those that I commanded that I would one day be their High Lord. But he didn't see it that way. Now that the shadows were back, he wanted me prepared to take his seat at a moment's notice. Though my preparations were already in place, I'd already chosen my successor for the legion. It would be Kallus, there was no question and surprisingly, father supported that decision.

He motioned for me to join him on the dance floor, I downed the rest of my wine and sat the empty glass on one of the side tables as I walked to join him. Kiira instantly stepped forward to dance with father. The music started and they began to sway just as she had with Knox, albeit much less gracefully. I turned my attention from them to where the crowd began to part. My eyes caught on hers as she made her way to the dancefloor, casting a glance over her shoulder at Eirian who simply nodded encouragingly. Asena continued to walk toward me, stopping at the edge of the floor. I strode over to her and bowed, offering her my hand. She took a step forward and placed her hand in mine. Her touch set me alight with joy and I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face. I pulled her in close and began to whisk her around the dance floor, leading her in a waltz. Her dress billowed and flowed as I spun her then dipped her low enough her wings almost touched the ground. I brought her back up and we began to move again, our movements perfectly in sync. Soon others began to join us on the floor, but they all fell away the longer I danced with her. One dance somehow turned into two which turned into three and before we knew it the night was almost through. I'd become so entranced by her that I hadn't noticed the time.

I leaned forward, my lips brushed the edge of her ear as I whispered. "Come with me, I want to show you something."

She nodded as I pulled back. I took her hand and led her from the dance floor, sneaking upstairs and disappearing through the same doorway I'd entered the room from.

"Where are we going?" She asked excitedly, adjusting her hand so her fingers interlaced with mine.

My heart leapt at that small gesture and I flashed her a smile. "It's a secret Little Wildfire, but I promise you won't be disappointed."

We rounded the corner and continued down the hall to the large ornate stained glass doors at the end. Her audible gasp was the only sound in the hall aside from the clacking of her heels against the marble floor. The sound soaked up by the red and silver draperies that hung along the dark marbled walls.

“The palace is beautiful,” she commented, “I suppose you were truthful in your sentiments about it.”

“Of course. I would never lie to you,” I replied.

She squeezed my hand lightly and smiled. I looked down to where our hands were joined and noticed her bare wrist. Her smile faded when she followed my gaze.

“We’re here,” I announced as we approached the towering doors, dropping her hand.

I pulled the doors open and revealed the expansive library that lay beyond. My gaze never wavered from her. I watched as her eyes lit with joy, true joy. It was as if a spark lit from behind her eyes, setting her entire face aglow. She came to life again as she took a step inside, taking in the sheer amount of books the room held. She spun in a circle, just fast enough for the hem of her dress to flare out as she turned. Her eyes were wide, mouth open in a surprised smile.

“It was definitely worth it,” she said finally, striding over and running a hand along the spines of the books on the shelf nearest to us.

“I’m glad you like it. You may come here whenever you wish and borrow as many books at a time as your arms can carry. I know it’s not the same as having your own books with you, but I hope it will be a suitable solution for now,” I said, smiling at her.

“It’s more than suitable, Ryker. This means,” she paused, “it means more than you know. Thank you.”

“You are more than welcome, Little Wildfire,” I replied, leaving her to venture into the library.

I watched at a close distance as she wandered between the shelves, collecting books in her arms. It was only when she stood on her tiptoes, struggling to reach a book on the high shelf that I went to help her. I placed my hands on her waist and lifted her into the air so that she could pluck the book from its place on the shelf with ease. I sat her back on the ground and removed the stack of books from her arms.

“You don’t have to carry those,” she said in protest.

I held my hand up. “I want to. Now go find more to add to your collection my little book dragon.”

She growled playfully at me before setting off toward the next row of shelves. When she'd selected five more books I began to look at the titles. There were a few romance novels, some fantasy, a few classics, and two that caught my attention.

"Little Wildfire, what are you doing with books about the histories of the original Dragonians?" I asked curiously.

"Oh, um. Just curious," she stammered, turning back toward the shelves in an attempt to hide the blush that coated her cheeks.

"It's not kind to lie," I said sternly, having scented the lie in the air.

She turned to face me once more, tucking a tendril of hair behind her pointed ear. Something had her on edge about this.

"You don't have to explain yourself if you're uncomfortable. Though, should you want to, I promise that I will keep this conversation to myself until you grant me permission to do otherwise," I said softly, raising my free hand to gently caress her cheek.

She leaned into my touch before turning to look at me again, biting her bottom lip nervously.

"What is it, Little Wildfire?" I asked cautiously.

"My mother is from Vekroth," She murmured.

"That's wonderful news, Asena! Perhaps you can visit with your family soon?" I suggested.

She sighed deeply before she spoke again. "I can't. I don't know who they are. That's why I was taking those books to try and pin down exactly where each family stems from and hopefully find out which one I belong to."

"Your mother never told you?" I asked, feeling my wide eyes grow wide.

She shook her head. "No. I merely overheard a conversation between her and my father the day I came here. They've kept my lineage from me, both on her side and my father's. Apparently it's *too dangerous* for me to know where I come from. So I left before they could try to justify their actions, leaving my trunk behind."

I frowned at her admission. "So that explains why your father wrote to mine requesting a visit to the camp, twice."

"Mother above, he is unbelievable. Any chance you can get your father to decline that request?" She asked, looking up at me with pleading eyes.

"Consider it done," I said, placing a soft kiss atop her head and she smiled slightly.

“Thank you.” Her smile began to fade as she spoke again. “How am I going to find them when I don’t even know their names?”

I sat the stack of books down and pulled her in close. “The answer to that is quite simple. I’m going to help you.”

She pulled away from me and shook her head. “I can’t ask that of you. You’ve already done more than enough for me.”

“You’re not asking, Little Wildfire. I’m offering,” I replied, with a flourish of my hand.

“I wish I could make him see that our people, that *you* are not the monster you are painted to be. Perhaps things would be different if I could, perhaps I would still be vowed to him,” she said softly.

“I assume we aren’t talking about your father,” I frowned, feeling as if I’d just been stabbed clean through the middle of my chest.

She bit her lip and looked down at her feet. “No.” She sighed. “Kyllan practically insulted our entire race without stopping to consider that I’m a Dragonian too now. The way he spoke about us, about our people... he has such hate in his heart for what the Crystal made me. After he left I felt unwanted, hideous even. Similar to how I felt that day in Selke’s shop, yet different. Then I’d only felt *wrong* and thought I looked like a living nightmare,” Her voice trailed off as silent tears rolled down her face.

I reached a hand up to swipe each tear that fell away, doing my best to stay rooted in place instead of flying to Rastia and hanging Kyllan by the neck against a wall until he agreed to apologize for hurting her.

“Do you not know how beautiful you are?” I asked.

She laughed in response. *Bad girl.*

I grabbed her by the chin, forcing her to look at me.

“There does not yet exist a culmination of words to describe how utterly breathtaking you are. I never want to hear that you think you are hideous in my presence ever again, Little Wildfire, because you are anything but.” My eyes bore into hers as I spoke, driving my point home. “Do you understand?”

She shook her head in confirmation. I released my hold on her and she swallowed a lump in her throat.

“Good girl, now let’s get you and this small army of books home,” I said.

I took her hand in mine before scooping her books up then led her from the room. She deserved someone that loved her with the fire of a

thousand suns. I'd thought she'd found him, turns out he was more than unworthy of her love.

# CHAPTER



## 49

### *Asena*

A month had passed since the celebration at Khisfire Palace and I was no closer to knowing my family here in Vekroth than I was when I arrived. Ryker dispelled back and forth between here and the palace weekly, bringing new books on family trees and the history of the realm with him each time, all the while trying to dig up anything he could on the shadows and dual element wielders. We'd taken to holing up in his cabin on the north side of the camp during the unit's days of rest to combine our research and bounce ideas off of one another. Though despite our efforts, we'd come up dry.

"I'm starting to think this is no use," I sighed, frustrated that once again we'd hit a dead end.

Ryker strode over with a thermos of coffee in hand and placed it before me. "Rest your mind for a bit, lovely. You've been at it for hours. It's been a while since we've had a training session, perhaps you'd like to learn how to fly?"

I jerked my head up at his offer. "Really? Do you think I'm ready?"

"I think you've been ready for a while now, Little Wildfire." He chuckled.

"Well, way to keep me in the dark there, Overgrown Lizard," I teased.

He placed a hand at my back, rubbing it in a small circular motion between my wings. The sensation was quite intimate yet it felt *right* somehow.

"Your mind was busy elsewhere, and I may only be offering now to try to better your mood for my next suggestion," he said nervously.

“If you want me to write to my mother you’ve lost your mind completely.” I laughed.

“I know better than to suggest that.” He chuckled. “I was thinking perhaps it’s time we included a few more minds in our search.”

I considered his words as I stood from the table and reached up to activate my pendant, sliding my training leathers into place.

“Who did you have in mind?” I asked.

“Kallus, Kiira, Knox and perhaps Eirian. I know you two have gotten rather close and I’d trust the others with my life,” he suggested.

I thought about his suggestion for less than a moment. “Okay. But only because you are going to teach me to fly properly, no more of this carrying me through the sky bullshit,” I chided.

He barked out a laugh. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

I marked my place in the book I’d spent the better portion of the afternoon scouring as Ryker readied himself to leave. He shed his black vest-like top revealing his hard muscular frame beneath it. My eyes raked over him, taking note of every tattoo, biting the corner of my lip as my gaze traveled down the valley between his abs to that delicious v just above his waistline. Blush flooded my cheeks when he spoke.

“Enjoying the view, are we?” He smirked.

I scowled at him in response and he chuckled slightly as he activated his own armor. *Shameless flirt*, I thought to myself. I flipped the book in front of me closed as he slid his boots on and hopped to his feet.

“Ready?” He asked.

“Just waiting on you to finish primping, Overgrown Lizard,” I quipped.

“Uh huh. Let’s see if you’re still playful after today’s lesson,” he said, ushering me through the door and up the hill to the training yard that the captains used to spar with one another.

After we’d run into Kiira’s unit practicing one morning before breakfast, we’d taken to using this yard instead. Ryker seemed to know without my having to tell him that I preferred our private lessons remain just that, private.

“So what do I need to know in order to flap these beauties so I can enjoy the wind whipping through my hair?” I asked.

“I’m afraid there’s a *bit* more to it than that. Today we will focus on your wing movement here on the ground. Once you’ve mastered that we will move to the peak of Antares and have you practice the same movements in the downdrafts and updrafts there. Then we will practice



some basic landings, but I'm afraid that will require a great bit of trust on your part as it involves me dropping you mid-air," he explained.

I shuddered at the thought of plummeting towards the ground with little knowledge of how to land properly.

"Hey, I won't let anything happen to you when that time comes. You know that, if you need further confirmation, remember the vow," he said, gesturing to the cuff that adorned my wrist.

"I know, doesn't mean the thought doesn't make me nervous," I admitted.

"You'll do great, Little Wildfire. You've already got excellent muscle built up in your core and back to support the weight of your wings. You're one of the few new cadets I haven't had to reprimand for dragging their wings along the ground," he said encouragingly.

I smiled. "Something deep down told me it was considered disrespectful to let them touch the ground. I most likely read it in a book somewhere, though if I did I can't say I remember where."

"You're right, but more than that it is seen as a sign of weakness. It shows that you can not support your own weight, so how would you be able to protect anyone? It also can be a hazard, the ground is full of sharp rocks, should one cut your wing, it would become easily infected by the dirt and grime you would no doubt be dragging it through as well," he explained further.

"So don't let them touch the ground, got it," I said.

He chuckled. "Right so let's go through the movements shall we? I'll demonstrate and you follow along. I may need to touch your wings to adjust them as necessary, if that is okay with you?"

I shook my head in confirmation, remembering the euphoric sensation of his light touch against the sensitive flesh of my wings. At least he'd warned me this time.

"That's fine," I breathed.

"Very well," he said, spreading his wings wide. "This is referred to as flared out."

I took in the height and span of how far he'd spread his wings. They seemed to have just a little give to them while still somehow being spread as far as they'd go. I did my best to mimic his movement and he came over to inspect them. Pleasure blossomed at the light touch of his hand as he adjusted my wings higher.

"Excellent, now rest and flare them out again," he ordered.

My shoulder muscles sighed with relief as I folded my wings in, giving them reprieve.

“Wait,” he said, moving to my wings once again.

He lowered them slightly and brought them closer to my sides. I felt my body shudder in response to his touch, not the tremble of fear I’d once felt for him.

“This is called tucked in. Your resting position is very close to this. You will be in this position if you need to descend at a quicker rate,” he explained.

“Good to know,” I replied bleakley.

I was doing my best to retain each position exactly, knowing that in reality it would take more than a day’s worth of training to get them right.

“Let’s move between flared out and tucked in a few times. Each time I will direct you on how to adjust your wings on your own, just think about how you need them to move and your muscles should do the rest,” he said.

Over the next hour I moved between the two positions resting every now and then. Each time my wings adjusted their positioning became better and better, though it still wasn’t perfect it was definitely an improvement from where I started. My back ached by the time we broke for lunch. I was already looking forward to standing beneath the hot water of my shower and letting it wash over the sore muscles, providing momentary relief.

“I’m going to have Kallus join us after lunch, he’ll be working with you tomorrow as I have to travel to one of the other realms,” he said as we walked down the hill towards the cafeteria.

“Oh. Just tomorrow?” I asked.

“Just tomorrow, Little Wildfire,” he replied, holding the door open for me. “Grab Eirian and go sit at my table. You two are formally invited to sit with us whenever you like.”

“Does this mean no more waiting in line?” I asked cheerfully.

“No more waiting in line, now go. Eirian looks like her head might explode if she doesn’t eat soon.” He laughed, nodding towards the lengthy line where she stood.

I walked over and grabbed Eirian by the arm, dragging her from her place in line despite her protesting.

“What the fuck, Asena? I’ve been waiting in that line forever,” she snapped.

“Now you won’t have to,” I said, still dragging her by the arm across the room.

She shook out of my hold. “What do you mean I won’t have to?”

“I mean we are now welcome to sit at Ryker’s table whenever we like. So no more waiting in that long ass line.” I beamed at her.

She swatted playfully at me. “I could actually hug you right now. So does this mean you and Ryker are.....” She trailed off.

“Are what?” I scoffed.

“Well you two *have* been spending a lot of time together recently. I just assumed you’d finally given into that *nothing* that isn’t going on between the two of you,” she chided, winking at me.

I rolled my eyes as we took our seats at the table. Knox, Kiira and Kallus fell silent at our arrival.

“Ryker invited us,” I explained.

“About bloody time,” Kiira said.

“About bloody time for what?” Ryker asked with a lifted brow as he sat two trays full of beef stew and bread before us.

“That you let us spend some time with your...” Knox started but Ryker shot him a look, “friend,” he finished.

Eirian giggled beside me and I elbowed her in the ribs.

“Hey!” She protested.

“We might as well get this out of the way, Little Wildfire. They’ll never leave us alone otherwise,” Ryker suggested, taking the seat to my left.

“Little Wildfire?” Kiira questioned.

I sighed. “Yes. That’s the name he called me the first time he saw me and apparently it stuck.”

“Right, and she calls me ‘Overgrown Lizard’. Charming, I know.” He smiled widely, taking a bite of his bread after dipping it in his stew. “Now back to the topic at hand, Asena feel free to continue. The rest of you, keep the commentary to a minimum until she’s finished, would you?”

I shot him a look to tell him I didn’t need him to reprimand our friends for having a bit of fun, even if it was at our expense. He returned that look with one full of an unspoken apology.

“Okay, so Kiira, do you remember the day you brought me to Vekroth?” I asked.

“Of course. This one almost had my head for not letting him retrieve you instead,” she said, jerking her head in Ryker’s direction.

“Right, so if you’ll remember I told you I have family here in Vekroth. My mother grew up here, but I don’t know much more than that I’m afraid. Ryker and I have been scouring the books in the palace library hoping for a glimpse of information about my family but we have yet to find anything,” I explained. “We are hoping that you all might be willing to help us out in finding out who my family is.”

Eirian looked positively gobsmacked. Kallus was entirely unphased and Knox looked furious.

“Why is finding them so important?” Kallus asked.

“Her parents hid her lineage from her. It’s by sheer luck she found out they’re still alive at all,” Ryker answered.

“They think it’s *too dangerous* for me to know who they really are,” I added.

The four of them looked between each other then back to Ryker and I. I bounced my leg nervously as I awaited their answer.

“Of course we will help you, Asena. Though I must ask, have you tried writing to your mother to see if she has had a change of heart?” Kiira finally responded.

I shook my head. “No. I don’t want to give her or my father a chance to try and defend their position on this. I deserve to know who my family is, even if they think otherwise.”

“Very well. When do we start?” Kallus asked.

“I’m to travel to another realm tomorrow on official emissary business, but you may work without me if you wish. I’ll stop by the palace on my way back here to retrieve a few more books that I think may help,” Ryker answered. “And Kallus, would you mind joining Asena and I for a bit of flight training after lunch? I’ll need you to take over her lessons tomorrow.”

“Of course,” he replied.

Knox was the first of us to finish his meal. He sat in silence as the rest of us chatted and finished our lunch before he finally spoke up.

“What is your mother’s name?” He asked.

“Elora, I’m afraid I don’t know what her surname was before she married my father. She rarely spoke about her time here and when she did it was only to mention her time at Sunniva Academy or the vow she made to her friend Morena,” I replied.

They all shuddered at the mention of Morena’s name.

“What?” I asked.

“Asena, you should know it is very rare for Dragonians to make vows, we do not enter into them lightly. There is only record of two ever being broken among our kind. The first was Edmar’s broken vow to Ravi to never harm any of the original nine. The second, and only other one on record was the vow between your mother and Morena. Though I’m afraid there’s something not quite right,” Knox explained.

“What?” I asked

“The vilande Morena was vowed to wasn’t named Elora. Her name was Reika,” he replied. “Your mother must have changed her name at some point after her Awakening.”

“Or she lied about the whole thing.” I scoffed, “it wouldn’t be the first time.”

I turned Knox’s words over in my mind as Ryker, Kallus and I made our way back to the training yard after lunch.

“Why didn’t you tell me vows mean more here?” I finally asked.

“I was afraid you would overthink it and change your mind,” Ryker replied simply.

I couldn’t blame him. He was right, as much as I hated to admit it. Though I should be upset with him for withholding that bit of information, I wasn’t upset with how things turned out between us. I finally had someone to rely on again, more than one someone if I was being honest with myself.

# CHAPTER



## 50

*Ryker*

When I left my cabin this morning, Asena was settled in on the plush red couch surrounded by stacks of books, determined as ever to track down her lineage while Eirian sat across from her in the black and silver armchair. Kallus had just arrived with three thermoses of coffee, electing to get on Asena's good side early in the day as she would likely be cussing him after their training session later today. Knox and Kiira went into town to ask around about anyone that had knowledge of Elora, Reika, or Morena, hoping to find a lead that way.

Now I found myself just outside the walls of Verena, unable to dispel within the city due to the wards placed around it preventing anyone who wasn't elven from doing so. I resided to fly the rest of the way to the castle. I hoped that Lady Selene received my late correspondence and Commander Montalli would be in attendance, along with Asena's trunk packed with her belongings.

I landed outside the front gates of Antheia Palace and sent a silent prayer to the Mother above that this meeting went well. Vekroth needed all the allies we could muster in our fight against the shadows. The gates swung open as I approached and I made my way inside the palace.

"Ryker, to what do I owe the pleasure? Elias said you had urgent business to discuss," Lady Selene said by way of greeting.

I always appreciated her for who she was. Direct and to the point, wasting no time on small talk.

"I do, I'm afraid. Is Commander Montalli here?" I asked.

"Yes, yes. Come, follow me," she said, ushering me down the sweeping corridor to the left of the entrance hall.

We walked the rest of the way in comfortable silence with only the sound of our muffled footsteps sounding throughout the hall to keep us company. Lady Selene pushed open a circular oak door at the end of the hall to the left and ducked inside, leaving me to follow after her.

“Commander Creed,” Roarke said, as I entered the room.

“Commander Montalli,” I replied with a nod.

I noted the large trunk that sat out of place on the far right side of the room. I’m glad he could follow instructions then. The thought of the look on my Little Wildfire’s face at *finally* having her belongings with her was enough to make this meeting with him tolerable. I was already growing eager to get back to her, longing for her whenever there was distance between us as if she was mine already.

Roarke waited for Lady Selene to firmly latch the door behind us before he spoke. I heard the door click just before he opened his mouth to speak.

“So Ryker, what’s the meaning of all this?” He asked as Lady Selene took her seat at what was obviously his desk given how small she looked in the large chair.

“The shadows have returned to Kinbrolds,” I said plainly.

If the two of them wanted to waste no time with pleasantries then I would do the same. The sooner this conversation was behind me, the sooner I could return home to surprise Asena. I took in their faces as my words finally sank in.

“But that simply can not be,” Lady Selene breathed. “Are you certain?”

“I’ve seen them affect members of the legion previously, though they were lying dormant until recently. It seems whoever is wielding them is targeting this year’s new recruits,” I replied, casting a pointed glance at Roarke.

“Have they affected Asena?” He asked, concern lacing his tone and creeping into the features of his face.

I took a deep breath before I answered, preparing myself for the outrage he was sure to respond with.

“They tried. She is strong and resilient. They were not successful. Though I do fear they may have affected her childhood friend, Kyllan. I’ve sent word to Lady Raeghan and Commander Lysa, they are keeping a watchful eye on him,” I responded.

He sighed and leaned back against the desk. “Has anyone else in Vekroth been affected?”

“No. I haven’t seen a hint of them in weeks. It is my worry that they have moved on to the other realms. Father and I are warning each of the High Court personally, so that you are all aware,” I said curtly.

Roarke turned to look at Lady Selene. “How would you like to proceed my lady?”

“Well first things first, we need to get word to your captains. Then of course we will need to start with screening the newest recruits. From there we will spread word to trusted shop owners and townsfolk. If the shadows are indeed here we will find who is harnessing them,” she said firmly.

“Have you heard any whispers of strange things from the other realms?” I asked.

Lady Selene shook her head. “No, I will reach out. If I hear anything I will send word to Elias immediately. If you’ll excuse me I’m going to return to my office to get started on those notices for the shop owners. I believe the two of you have a few things to discuss. Thank you Ryker for the warning on this matter. Herbexia will help you in any way we can.”

She stood and moved to exit the room, only pausing to place a hand on my shoulder momentarily. A moment later she was gone. Tension hung thick in the air. Regardless of the fact that we found ourselves on the same side of this fight, I could still sense the disregard he felt for my kind.

“Let’s get on with it then. What more do you have to discuss with me?” Roarke asked, rounding the desk to sit in the large chair facing me.

“Your daughter wishes to know her family,” I said through gritted teeth.

A muscle feathered in my jaw and I didn’t bother to hide my distaste for his actions where Asena was concerned.

“I’m afraid that’s really none of your concern, *Commander*. Unless you’ve found yourself warming my daughter’s bed. But no you wouldn’t be able to do that now would you, not while she is vowed to another.” He grinned wildly, his cold natured heart revealing itself.

I laughed. By the Crystal, I loved knowing more than the other person in the room. He hadn’t been made aware, which told me Kyllan hadn’t communicated with him either.

“You don’t know then?” I asked, my head cocked to one side.

“Know what?” He asked.

“Kyllan released Asena from her vow. She is no longer tied to him,” I revealed. “Now I’ll say it again. Your daughter wishes to know who her



family is, she has the right to know, Roarke.”

His gaze darkened at my boldness before he righted himself, sliding his mask of indifference back in place.

He waved a hand. “Bah, she’ll be fine. Just strap that trunk of her belongings to your back and go home, boy. There’s more to this story than I’m willing to share with the likes of you.”

I dug my heels in, refusing to relent on this subject. She deserved to know where she came from.

“You don’t have to tell me, but you will write Asena and tell her who her mother really is. Unless she lied about being vowed to Morena. She knows her mother’s real name is Reika,” I spat, pulling the tendrils of heat back that escaped me.

He sat with his mouth agape for quite some time before he finally spoke.

“How does she know?” He swallowed.

“The vow Morena made, it wasn’t to a female named Elora. Currently, Asena thinks Elora inserted herself into Morena’s story. If she truly is in danger let me know why. I vowed to protect her,” I said, showing the cuff that until now, had remained tucked in the sleeve of my leathers.

# CHAPTER



## 51

*Asena*

“Ugh. I feel like we are getting nowhere,” I groaned.

We’d been at it for hours and still found no mention of an Elora or Reika notated in any of the books that covered the families in Vekroth. Perhaps the books Ryker was bringing this afternoon would provide some sort of answer. He was going to search for any information on the vow between Morena and Reika as well. We were all hopeful that search would prove fruitful, though I had my doubts.

“Come on, Red, let’s grab some lunch before it’s too late, and we still need to work on your new wing positions if you ever want to get in the sky,” Kallus suggested.

“Fine. My brain could use the break anyway.” I sighed.

“Finally. I’m starving over here,” Eirian chided.

I stuck my tongue out at her which she replied to with a vulgar gesture and I laughed. It felt *good* to have friends again. I still hadn’t written to Kyllan, not that he’d have bothered to write back. Though, I did hear from Ezra shortly after Kyllan returned to Rastia. He said he was sorry to hear of the rift that formed between Kyllan and I but hoped I would find my own happiness here in Vekroth. He also promised to keep an eye on Kyllan and report anything out of the ordinary.

We made it to the end of the path that led to the glass orb building when we spotted Knox and Kiira approaching from the other side. Kallus’s face twisted into a grin at the sight of them.

“Want to have a bit of fun, Red?” He asked with a wildness in his eyes.

“What did you have in mind?” I replied.

“Can I help?” Eirian asked excitedly.

His grin turned mischievous as he spoke again. “I owe my brother a bit of payback and if you’re willing, I’d like your help in pranking him.”

I exchanged a wild grin with Eirian then turned to him.

“What do we need to do?” We asked in unison.

“I just need you two to distract him while I duck off to the kitchens. If you’re already seated at the table he won’t go back there himself. So you need to lie to him, make him think you went ahead without me,” he explained.

“So we should stand in line and complain loudly about it. Got it,” Eirian said.

Kallus nodded. “That should do the trick. Then when he goes to get the food, I’ll dump the bucket of honey and feathers on him that I’ve had stashed there for weeks.”

Eirian and I giggled at the thought then darted into the cafeteria. Thankfully, she spotted Garreth standing in line and he waved us over.

“Hey, we just need to sneak in here for a second. Play along okay?” I asked, squeezing in line between him and the large male in front of him.

Eirian squeezed in behind Garreth despite the protests from the people behind her. Knox walked through the door a moment later and we set our plan into motion, moaning about how long the line always was. It worked beautifully as Knox soon turned his attention our way after directing Kiira to have a seat at their usual table. My palms grew clammy from the excitement and nervousness running through me. It was showtime.

“What are you two doing over here? Where’s Kallus?” He asked.

“Oh he told us to go ahead, that he’d catch up, thinking that you and Kiira were already here,” I lied.

“Okay, so why are you waiting here? It doesn’t matter, come on,” He said, not bothering to wait for an answer.

I stayed firmly in place as he led Eirian to the table where Kiira sat. He turned around and glared at me when he noticed I wasn’t

following behind them. He marched over and pulled me out of line.

“When Ryker invites you to his table, that invitation extends even when he is not present. Haven’t you learned that by now, Red?” He asked.

He stared at me as I remained silent, laughing internally at his frustration knowing it would cause him to be too distracted to see Kallus coming once he entered the kitchens.

“Unbelievable. The both of you,” he scoffed as he turned on his heel and headed towards the kitchen door.

A loud crash came from the kitchen followed by a slew of curses and Kallus ran from the cafeteria faster than I’d ever seen him move. Kiira turned to look at us.

“Do I want to know what that was about?” She asked.

I smiled, “Oh you’ll find out soon.”

About that time Knox burst through the doors covered in black feathers, honey dripping off of him and he stormed from the cafeteria. Kiira shook her head and burst out laughing only after Knox was outside.

“Be prepared for him to figure out you were in on it. These boys and their pranks,” she said, rising from her seat. “I guess *I’ll* be getting us lunch today.”

Kiira returned to the table a short while later carrying a tray of sandwiches and crisped potatoes. I gobbled down every bite I could possibly hold, not realizing how hungry I was after skipping breakfast until I started eating. Kallus returned just as I finished eating.

“Thanks for the help ladies,” he said, swiping a sandwich off of the tray. “You ready for more wing positions, Red?”

“Yes please. Get me out of here before Knox gets back.” I laughed, standing to join him.

“Eirian, you’re welcome to come,” he added.

She looked at him like he’d lost his mind. “No thanks, I’ll be at Ryker’s cabin surrounded by books if you need me.”

“Suit yourself,” he said and headed towards the door.

“I’ll see you all for dinner. Try to convince Knox it was just a bit of fun, yea?” I said before taking my leave.

I followed behind Kallus as we walked back to the captain’s training yard. He started by having me review the wing movements

Ryker taught me yesterday a few times before teaching me the new movements.

“Good work,” he said, flaring his wings out and back. “This position is referred to as backflap.”

I mimicked his wing movements. He walked around me, inspecting the position.

“You’ll need to raise them slightly higher, but the positioning is close to perfect.”

He had me work through the three movements, adding downtime for us to rest between the sets. We’d gone through ten rotations and I was having a bit of trouble keeping my wings up.

“I might have something to help, one of the healers created a salve to help the Legion with muscle aches after battle,” he said and turned stalking off toward the small building just to the left of the grounds.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

He cast a glance over his shoulder. “There should be some of that salve in the cabin. I’ll be right back, just keep practicing those movements,” he called over his shoulder, almost too soft for me to hear.

He disappeared into the building, and I went back to practicing my defensive stance, stalking towards the center of the training arena. I ran through the wing positions until I lost count of how many times I had done it. My back ached from the movements, and I sat down to stretch. I went through the familiar rotation with ease, relishing at the release of tension in my back and shoulders. *Where is he?* I thought to myself and sauntered off toward the building he had disappeared into.

I’d made it just over halfway when two hooded figures blocked my path, obscuring my view of anything that lay beyond them. Sheer terror shot through me as I turned and ran in the opposite direction. *This is happening, this is real.* I thought to myself. I sent a blast of heat at the cuff on my wrist, hopefully this thing worked wherever Ryker was.

I ran as hard as I could, constantly checking over my shoulder to see if they were pursuing me. The figures did not follow me, remaining stationary as I ran further and further away, only stopping to catch my breath once I could no longer see them. I needed to call to Ryker, to get him here now. Sending heat at the cuff alone wasn’t enough. I needed to do the unthinkable, to ensure he would come swiftly.

“I release you from your vow Ryker,” I said silently, unclasping the bracelet father had gifted me and letting it drop to the ground.

I did not want him to follow me to the hell I was sure to endure if my night visions held any truth. I only needed him to know that they had come to fruition, and that I needed him in this moment. That if he didn't make it back in time, to know that I didn't abandon him. I left my cuff firmly in place on my wrist, hopeful that he would be able to track the magik imbued within it, even without the vow in place. If I was indeed going to be dragged into the darkness, I needed to have a glimmer of hope that someone would find me.

I'd only caught my breath when all of the light around me was replaced by darkness. Shadows cascaded down from the sky in two thick clouds of black smoke. The hooded figures appeared in front of me once more, stepping out from the shadows and reaching for my arms.

“Get away from me!” I screamed into the cloud of silence surrounding us, breaking free from their grasp.

I ran from the hooded figures only to crash into nothing. *I must escape*, I thought to myself. *Find a way out of here, you are smart. Look for the weakness in the power, they all have one.* I clawed at the space in front of me trying to escape to no avail. Their powers were foreign to me, ones of darkness, conjuration, and invisibility. I didn't know of anyone that could wield them and yet while I sat there, clawing at the walls I could not see, I felt a featherlight familiarity. I'd felt this magik before, on that first day I tried to wield my magik unsuccessfully. It was a hand made of this power that ripped my flame from within me.

The thought sent a chill through me, clear to my bones and I ran. I ran until I hit another wall of nothingness, and again and again. The realization set in that I was indeed trapped, a cage built of invisible walls surrounding me. My greatest fear had come to light. My night visions were playing out before me and I would be taken from this realm. From my new home, my friends and the male I was growing to love.

“Let me out!” I screamed as I banged on the walls of my cage.

One of the figures approached the cage. “You belong to me now, girl. I suggest you get used to that idea,” a female voice spoke.

I heard Kallus calling my name as the familiar view of Antares faded and was replaced by what appeared to be a dark, dingy dungeon. I took in my surroundings doing my best to commit them

to memory so that if I did manage to escape, I would be able to tell someone, *anyone*, where I'd been held captive.

# CHAPTER



## 52

*Ryker*

My mind was trying to navigate through the sea of information Roarke had just given me. Elora and Reika were in fact one in the same. Now that I knew the truth I was inclined to agree that it was dangerous for Asena to know her heritage. However, that wasn't my decision to make. If she was to truly ever be safe, she couldn't be held in the dark any longer.

"You're certain that all of this is true?" I asked.

I felt a sudden flash of heat radiate from the cuff on my wrist. A twinge of fear panged in my chest, whether it was from me or her I couldn't be sure. I glanced down at it but almost as suddenly as it came, it disappeared. Kallus must be working with her on controlling her power as well, if she was truly in danger that feeling would have remained. Roarke began to speak again and I turned my attention back to where he still stood.

"Why would my wife lie to me for almost one hundred years about this, Ryker? Think about it. Did you really expect their lines to just die out?" He retorted.

"No one has seen or heard from them in hundreds of years Roarke. Not since..." I said my voice trailing off.

He shook his head. "I know. Just as I know this is hard to believe but trust me when I say what I tell you is the truth. It is why we have kept it from her for so long, to ensure her safety."

I ran a hand over my face. The information I now carried about her lineage would change her life forever. A selfish male would keep it to himself, but I wasn't selfish, at least not in that way. I was only selfish



with her time, wanting to keep her for myself. To steal her away and keep her from those who wished to harm her.

That's when I felt it. She'd broken the vow. My entire world collapsed as the breath was stolen from my lungs. *No*. This couldn't be happening. I stumbled to one of the chairs across the room. Roarke asked me something, but I couldn't hear him above the ringing in my ears.

Why had she done this? Some innate feeling told me I needed to release her from the vow, so I did, silently to myself. My vision cleared and the ringing stopped. Only then did my mind find clarity. I knew at once the reason behind her actions. Her greatest fear had become reality. The fear I'd felt earlier was hers, though now that same feeling ran deep within me. I had this sense of urgency to return to her, to protect her.

"Are you okay? You look white as a ghost boy," Roarke noted

I shook my head. "She broke the vow." My voice came out barely above a whisper.

"What?" He asked, alarm riddled throughout his tone.

"Your daughter broke her vow to me," I said, my anger rushing to the surface.

He shook his head. "Why would she do such a thing? Why risk her safety if she thinks you're the one that was set to harm her?"

"I can only think of one reason and Crystal save the fucking world if I'm right. Roarke, you have my permission to visit Vekroth. Now dispel us the fuck out of this castle before I lose my mind," I barked.

He was taken aback by my crassness, but I didn't care. All decorum had left me. There was only one thing that mattered and that was knowing that she was safe. That my thoughts were running away from me. I could only hope that I was wrong, that she'd broken the vow and fled before the shadows had the chance to take her.

Roarke moved towards the trunk at the side of the room. Heat radiated from my body as my anger continued to flare. I didn't bother tamping it back down, knowing it would be of no use until I had her in my arms. Until I knew she was safe.

"Leave the bloody trunk, let's go. Dispel us right outside Verena. I'll take us directly to the grounds where she should be. Mother above I hope I'm wrong about this," I said, urgency thick in my voice.

"What's going on?" He asked, seeking clarity of his own before moving.

Fire danced in my eyes as my gaze bore into him.

“Your daughter may have been taken, now let’s go before I set this room on fire to get you to move your ass.” I gritted out.

Panic blanched Roarke’s features and he took hold of my arm. The walls within his office fell away and we found ourselves just outside the city. Our boots barely had time to hit the dirt before I had us back in Vekroth. We landed in the captain’s training yard, but it was empty.

“Where are we?” Roarke asked, “and why is it so bloody hot?”

“We are in the legions training grounds. Asena should be here, in this very spot, working on her wing movements.” I turned around searching for her from every angle.

There was no sight of her or Kallus. My ears perked up, listening for the faintest sound of wing movement. There was nothing, only silence.

“Asena!” Roarke called out.

No one answered.

“Stay here and keep looking. I’m going to see if I can find her from above.” I didn’t give him time to respond as I flared my wings out and shot into the air.

I flew over each of the training yards, but each of them remained the same as the one we used for our lessons, empty. *Where are you, Little Wildfire?* I soared back to where I’d left Roarke and something glinted off the hard ground as I dove in for my landing. I walked over to where the light was refracting off of something there on the ground.

*No.* There in the dirt was the bracelet her father had given her on her last birthday, lying there as if it meant nothing at all. I dropped to the ground, a sound erupted from my chest that was inhuman as I clutched it to my body. Unable to contain the despair within my heart, I sat there sobbing, not caring that footsteps were approaching. Nothing mattered right now outside of her. I never should have left her. Perhaps if I hadn’t she would still be here, guilt was beginning to sink in and I let it.

The Mother was punishing me for not upholding my end of the vow I’d made. Ultimately I wasn’t here to protect her when the time came. It was Kallus, not I that let her be taken.

“Ryker. Ryker, I’m so sorry,” Kallus said cautiously. “I was only gone a moment.”

“Why the fuck did you leave her alone at all? You *knew* about our night visions yet you still left her out here alone,” I snapped at him, tears still stinging the corners of my eyes.

“Ryker, it’s not his fault. No one could have predicted,” Kiira said in an attempt to calm me.

I cut her off. “We did, our night visions told us of the fate that was set to befall her yet she was left alone.”

“What do you mean *our* night visions?” Roarke asked as he approached the five of us.

I rose from the ground and looked him square in the eyes. “I’ve been having the same night visions your daughter has, for as long as she has. We were connected before I ever met her. It is why I vowed myself to her, to try to prevent this very fucking thing from happening. It seems it was all for nothing. She’s been taken and we have no clue where to start, save for finding whoever is wielding the shadows.”

His eyes widened with surprise. I could see the gears turning in his head as he processed what I had just said to him. “Perhaps I was wrong to assume the worst about you and those of Vekroth. I apologize Ryker, to all of you really. Thank you for trying to keep her safe, this means more to me than I could ever describe.”

“Why do you think they took her?” Knox asked.

I shook my head and flashed Roarke a look. While I wasn’t sure Asena’s lineage was the reason she was taken, I’d be willing to wager it had a large part to play in her disappearance.

“I don’t know. Right now we just need to focus on tracking down the shadows and getting her back,” I said firmly.

He clasped me on the shoulder. “I will throw the full weight of the Brokenstone Army behind our search. We will find who’s taken her, Ryker. This I promise you.”

His words held no sign of distrust or hatred. For once I was viewed as an equal to someone other than a member of my own realm. My eyes darkened, my sense of purpose renewed. I would get her back, even if it killed me in the process.

“May the Mother have mercy on the soul who took her, because I wont,” I promised.

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# About The Author

SE Naumann is the author of fantasy and romance novels. In 2022 she began writing her debut novel *The Awakening*.

SE Naumann currently resides in Kentucky with her fiancé and their furbaby, Sadie. In her free time she enjoys reading, gaming, and working in her craft room.

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