



AN AWAKENED
CURSES NOVEL

VOW *a*

ROGUE

HAYLEY FAIMAN

Vow to a Rogue

A RAPUNZEL RETELLING

AN AWAKENED CURSES NOVEL

BOOK THREE

HAYLEY FAIMAN

HAYLEY FAIMAN BOOKS, LLC

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Vow to a Rogue

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I think the greatest rogues are they who talk most of their honesty.

— ANTHONY TROLLOPE

Prologue

“YOU CANNOT STAY HERE,” SHE TELLS THE GIRL.

“I cannot?” she asks, her brows knitting together in confusion.

There is no doubt she is confused. She, indeed, has been torn from her marriage bed and brought here. Though it matters not. The gods have called this moment, this meeting with this woman. It is not up to her or anyone else. It is solely up to the gods and their demands.

Her big green eyes stare straight ahead at the witch. Though she prefers the title *noita* rather than *witch*. However, she doesn't use her magic powers for much these days, so the title has not been important for a very long time. Typically, her powers are used for things such as love spells or the like, but this is different.

Today is different.

The gods have come to her in a vision.

They expressed to her that this woman, this *Meri*, must be sent to another world, away from this place. It was their desire. Deemed necessary. And her duty to make this a reality. The *noita's* heart slams against her chest.

This request is too much. It is not done at all, legally or otherwise.

Yet the gods have demanded this. They have commanded that she break the fundamental rule and the law. There is no

alternative. But this must be done. Defying the gods brings a much bigger punishment than the law could ever deliver.

Her decision made, she sucks in a deep breath, then connects her gaze to the girl... Meri.

“Where can I go?” Meri asks.

“You will go to another world.”

Her eyes widen further, and she shakes her head once. “I cannot leave,” she whispers. “My husband. I’ve been chosen. I am his bride. It has been consummated. I cannot walk away from him, the curse.”

Those wide eyes gather wetness, and the *noita’s* heart cracks at the sight. The girl is too young, and yet, this is her fate. There is no other way around this. Gods do not make mistakes, and even if they do, it is never discussed.

“The gods demand it.”

“They demand it?” she whispers, repeating the words, the soft sound almost deafening. “The marriage?” Meri asks.

“The gods have a plan.”

It is all the *noita* can give her. She cannot express to her that another woman will take her place. It would no doubt cause a heartache that would do no good to anyone. Meri must not know the details, which is easy, as the *noita* knows nothing of significance herself.

Meri clears her throat, resigned to her destiny. Reaching her arm forward, she takes the *noita’s* hand and nods her head once. There is silence as the two women stare into one another’s eyes. No words are spoken, just gathering strength and calmness... then finally peace.

Meri dips her chin, staring at the table for a long moment as she breathes deeply, her mind working through the situation at hand. Slowly, she lifts her head, her gaze finding the *noita’s* once more. Her smile trembles, but she attempts to put on a brave face for the *noita*.

“If it is the gods’ will, then I will fulfill this duty. But can you try to send me somewhere beautiful?”

The *noita* is filled with guilt.

It consumes her.

She does something that she should not—she does not send the girl to another world as the gods demand. Instead, she concentrates and sends her to a small cabin in the country, a place where she will be far removed from the capital city, from her people, but not in another world.

She watches as the girl vanishes before her eyes, her green eyes being the last thing of her body that disappears. Guilt consumes the *noita* until there is nothing left of the girl. No trace. Just... nothingness.

The *noita* then searches the realms for Meri's twin. It does not take her long to find the girl. Though she had hoped she would be of this world rather than a place that is undesirable. However, that is exactly where she is located.

She finds her in a horrid place that is filled with smoke and noise. It is not anywhere that the *noita* would wish to visit.

Using all her power, she brings "that Meri" here, a place where she will no doubt be despondent. Using everything inside of her, she harnesses her energy and magic on Meri's twin.

This spell has little control.

The *noita* does not know exactly where the new queen will land, but she is somewhere here in this world. She can feel her presence. She closes her eyes and tries to locate the new Meri, but before she can even think of the few locations where she might find the queen, something dark flies overhead.

A dragon.

Gods.

How is this possible?

She rushes to the window, looking out at the sky just so she can see the phenomenon for herself. It is true.

A dragon flies above.

A true dragon.

It is inconceivable.

And yet she sees it with her own eyes.

The gods.

Chapter One

HELMI

STRETCHING, I WONDER WHAT FRESH HELL AWAITS ME TODAY at work. I'm so sick of working retail that I could scream. Plus, it's peak holiday shopping season on top of that... It's a nightmare, day in and day out. If I get yelled at one more time for just doing my job, I might have a nervous breakdown.

Rolling over to my side, I slide my tongue along my bottom lip before I force myself to open my eyes. They flutter open, but what greets me is not my room. In fact, it's a window I've never seen before, a curved window in the middle of a stone wall, with no glass or covering or anything, all of which I've never set eyes on before *in my life*.

Placing my palms on the mattress, I start to push up to a seated position when I feel a heavy band wrap around my waist. I flick my gaze down, my eyes traveling to the heavy band... It's an arm.

A tanned, muscular arm.

I did not go to bed with this arm last night. In fact, I clearly remember being in my own bed as I closed my eyes. And my own bed does not include a man of any kind, especially not a muscular, gold-toned, brown-haired man.

My heart slams against my chest, my breathing becomes labored, and I start to feel light-headed as a million scenarios

enter my head, none of them good in any way whatsoever. I've clearly been drugged and kidnapped from my bed.

I want to scream, but I'm afraid of who this person is and what they'll do to me. I hear him groan as his body shifts a bit closer to mine.

Then it happens.

His hard length presses against my ass crack.

Oh. My. God.

He says something to me, but I don't understand his words. It's definitely not English, and I freeze. He murmurs something, but again, I don't understand any of it. I can't even place the language, not even if I wanted to try.

I'm so freaking scared, and then I wonder if maybe this is just a dream. Would I dream in another language that I don't understand? Is that even possible?

"I don't understand you," I whisper as my body trembles.

He stiffens behind me for just a moment, then relaxes as his mouth moves against my skin with his next words. "Good morning, *wife*," he murmurs, his voice heavily accented, his lips touching the back of my neck. "How do you not understand our native tongue today, yet last eve you comprehended perfectly?"

I don't answer him. I know that my body is stiff. My entire being is like a solid brick wall, but if this man behind me notices, he doesn't say a single word. He doesn't even seem too concerned about the language situation, but I don't know where the hell I even am.

In fact, he completely drops the subject as his lips slide down my neck and across my shoulder. His finger glides down the center of my stomach, stopping at the top of my pussy. It's this exact moment when I realize I'm naked... not just a little naked, but completely and totally bare.

I'm not just lying beside a strange man who speaks a strange language... I'm naked, too.

This can't be real.

I don't know if it's that adrenaline strength that is always talked about, but somehow, I break free of his heavy arm and soar out of bed. Turning to him, I open my mouth and try not to scream, so a whimper escapes my lips at the gigantic naked man in that strange bed.

He sits up, his chest on display, and my gaze travels down, and down, to his chest and abs, unable to look away from the rippling muscle that greets me there. He's strong, tan, and rugged. I've never seen a man like this in all my life, let alone been naked with one.

My eyes slip down a touch more, and my nostrils flare as I try to breathe at the sight of his... well... his *thing*. Quickly, I lift my gaze back up to meet his, and I wonder what the hell is happening here. How am I here? And why is he looking at me like he knows me? Not like he kidnapped me or anything weird, but like he knows me, and he's confused at my confusion.

Wrapping my arms across my belly, I try to make myself smaller. Though it would be impossible since I'm definitely not a shrinking violet in any way whatsoever. I like to eat. I always have. My metabolism has never kept up with the breads and baked goods I enjoy not only making but also partaking in the eating of.

So, while I'm not overweight in any way since I'm super active, I also look like I've never turned down a taco... mainly because I haven't.

"Come back to bed, bride," he grunts, his eyes almost appearing as if they are on fire. I've never seen anything like it before. But that isn't what keeps me frozen in my spot. I stare at him, unable to speak.

Bride.

What the fuck?

Then I remember when, just a moment ago, he called me *wife*.

What the hell again?

Bride. Wife. I don't understand what is happening. This is beyond a kidnapping. This man is delusional, and at this point, I'm pretty certain that I'm not dreaming. I think I would have woken up by now, for sure.

"Meri," he snaps, his voice rumbling deep.

I take a step backward at the way he said that name. And to me. Meri. I realize he thinks I'm someone else and that someone else is his *wife*. My heart races as I try to figure out how I got into this predicament. Maybe I sleepwalked or something? I don't know how I would sleepwalk into someone else's stone house, strip naked, and climb into bed with them, though. I don't think any amount of dreaming or whatever could make me do that.

"My name is Helmi," I say. "I know it sounds like a weird name, but it's honestly *my* name. My grandparents were Finnish," I ramble as if he cares about my name being Finnish or weird. He's staring at me like I'm a crazy person.

"Your name is Meri, and you are my wife," he states. "We were married yesterday."

Shaking my head slowly, I continue to keep my arms wrapped around my naked body in an attempt to hide myself from him. From his gaze, from the embarrassment I feel. It doesn't work, though. My *everything* is too big for just my two arms to cover.

"My name is Helmi. I was born in California. Which is why I speak English. I have a mom, a dad, and an older brother. I'm not this Meri person. I don't know what's happening here, but I don't like anything about it. I want to go home."

My last words come out as a hiccup. And that is when the man decides he has had enough. I watch as anger slides over his face, his expression clear as day. His brows snap together, his lips curve into a snarl, and he takes a step toward me.

"You make no sense. You do not speak that language, *English*. I do not understand this that you say," he barks. "Was

your sweetness last night just an illusion, a spell? *Did you enchant me?*”

His last words come out on a hiss, and I shake my head slowly, mainly because I have no idea what he’s even saying. This is the weirdest moment of my entire life. I’m not sure if it’s reality or if this is just a super realistic dream.

“I wasn’t here last night,” I whisper.

He leans over slightly, his fists still on his hips as he stares directly into my eyes. “Fine,” he snaps angrily as he straightens his spine. “You shall stay in here until you remember the events of yesterday.”

Without another word, he spins around and stomps to the door, pulls it open, then stomps out of the room. I watch as he jerks the door behind him, and it closes with a loud thud. It causes me to jump, then I hear some clanking metal sound and realize he’s locked me inside. But what I really can’t get past is that he’s just walking around out in the halls completely naked.

Reaching for the bed, I grasp the sheet and wrap it around my body in an attempt to cover myself.

What the hell is going on here?

Am I in a dream?

A nightmare?

Am I even alive?

Did I die, and this is my “dead person” reality?

At least if that’s the case, I’ll be married and have sex. Dying a virgin isn’t so bad if you’re married and doing all the things in the afterworld. I’ll take it. But I wasn’t ready to die, and how did I do that? In my sleep? Aren’t I a bit young for that?

My mind is racing, my thoughts all over the place, and then I begin to pace. My feet move without my brain telling them what to do, and that is how I end up at the window. I stare out but don’t register what I’m seeing, not really.

Green as far as the eye can see until it reaches the sea. I stare out at the few rolling hills and notice that there are flowers, but they look as if they're green, too. It's as if the only color that exists is green.

I tip my head down and look at the sheet that's covering my body. Green. Not just green, but emerald green. Leisurely, I turn around and take in the space. The room is round. I must be in a tower of some kind. It's amazing and beautiful, and at any other time, I would be in awe and examine every single aspect of the craftsmanship.

But this isn't the time for that.

I'm locked in a damn tower.

What the hell is this?

There's nothing in the room except a bed and two doors. No dresser, no mirror, no closet.

Nothing.

My hands tremble, followed by my knees. Unable to hold myself up for a second longer, I slowly sink down to the floor. My back rests against the stone wall as I bend my legs and place my chin on the tops of my knees.

"What is happening?" I whisper to myself.

Tears fill my eyes, my emotions taking over, much to my demise. This is and will always be my downfall—my emotions. I'm a crybaby. I always have been. I've tried to be strong. I've tried to be tough, but I'm not. I never have been.

I cry about everything.

KARO

"SHE CLAIMS SHE REMEMBERS NOTHING. SHE WAKES UP speaking a different language," I grind out as I stare across the dining room at my brother, Runo.

We're sitting at the long table in the great hall, though with the festivities of yesterday and last eve, we are practically alone. Everyone else is sleeping off the party from the evening

before. I should have stayed with the guests and had my own fun rather than consummating my marriage with a woman who is likely not right in the head as she is behaving as though I am a stranger.

“Nothing?” Runo asks. “And a different language? I do not understand this.”

I do not understand it either.

My brother is ready to have his own marriage, a deal that I’ve brokered for him with the princess of Sgaldachadh. We will wait until the finalized documents and the bride are delivered, but the terms have been agreed on. She will be here soon, hopefully.

“Nothing,” I confirm. “Behaved as if I were a stranger and as if she could not understand Maapalloian.”

Runo lifts his hand, rubbing his chin a few times as he does, then shifts his attention to the ceiling before he levels me with a gaze.

“Is she unwell? Did her family lie about her stability?”

Since I only met my bride yesterday, I cannot attest to her mental capabilities, although she seemed well to me. A bit shy, but I assumed that was because we were strangers to one another and she had lived her life in isolation, surrounded by women, so she was not used to being around men in general.

“Is her father still here?”

Runo shakes his head slowly back and forth. “They departed after the ceremony. He does not know her well enough to even tell me what color her eyes are, let alone her state of mind.”

“Then get the *tietäjä*.”

“Are you sure? Do you not wish to have the crown’s healer?”

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I think about the question. There is a difference between the *tietäjä* and the crown’s healer. One is off the books, secret, and

unconventional. The other, everyone will be discussing at the evening meal.

Releasing my lip, I nod once. “This must be kept secret until we know what has happened. The *tietäjä*.”

Runo frowns, his gaze shifting to his feet before he slowly lifts it up to meet mine. “Are you sure that you are not looking for something to be wrong with her, brother?” he asks.

I can understand what he’s saying. It’s not as if I’ve had a choice in all of this. I haven’t. Marrying this woman is what is expected of me. I’ve never felt any particular way about it, good or bad. It is just the way life is for me.

Tilting my head to the side, I don’t say anything as I watch him, wondering what he is trying to tell me. It is clear he has something on the tip of his tongue. Sucking in a breath, I hold it as I wait for him. I don’t respond to his words or to his question because I can tell he has more.

“You did not want this marriage. Could it be that you wish to find something wrong with her so that you can hide her away?”

Who would want a marriage to a woman whom they were unable to even see before the ceremony? What king would wish for his choices to be stripped? To have his control taken from him? There is not a single one.

“Hide her away?”

“In the tower.”

The tower.

He knows the significance of the tower as well as I do. And as much as I would like to say that I am different from my family’s past, that I have learned from their mistakes, I don’t think I have. As it is very apparent that I am my father’s son.

“*Karo*,” he warns.

Only my brother can speak to me with such informality. Although I am not such a harsh king as my father and grandfather. I don’t demand that people address me any certain

way. I suppose it depends on who is addressing me. If it is someone close, I don't mind if they use my given name. If it is a stranger, I will have an issue.

“*What?*” I bark.

“You do this, and you have the potential to damage your bride. You, of all people, understand the repercussions of that. We're already such an isolated country. To isolate her even more than that? It could be devastating. Hasn't she been isolated enough?”

“That is why the *tietäjä* must be brought in,” I say. “I need to know what exactly I'm dealing with here.”

Runo lets out a sigh, taking a step backward. His eyes never leave mine, and I wait for him to finish his thought. He clearly has more to say to me, and I'll wait until my brother gets all his opinions out. He has many of them, and while he understands many things about being a king, this is not one of them.

“You're dealing with a brand-new bride, someone you know absolutely nothing about, and it's been less than twenty-four hours. You're already ready to lock her up in the tower. Which is much more isolating than the situation she was raised in. Mayhap she is just confused?”

He's right. I am quick to lock her away. It is what I know, and it is what would be easiest. My father did it. His father did it. Locked in a tower forever. Once, a boy was brought into this world, perhaps a spare as well, locked away, never to be seen again.

Perhaps I should wait to see what she says first before I commit my bride to a lifetime of solitude in the tower.

Chapter Two

HELMI

WHEN I REALIZE THAT NOBODY IS COMING TO SAVE ME, I stand from the hard floor. Closing my eyes as I turn around to face the window again, I wonder if it has changed since the last time I looked out. I don't know what sight is going to greet me when I open my eyes, but I force myself to do just that.

When my eyes open, my breathing stops.

The sight that greets me is still otherworldly.

There is no other way to describe it. *Otherworldly*. Everything is still green, but it's not just regular grass green. There is a vibrancy I've never witnessed before. It's almost like those old movies that were colored with Technicolor and were extremely vibrant. That's what it looks like.

It's beautiful, and I find myself mesmerized by the colors, the landscape, all of it.

Scanning the small rolling hills, I find little hot-pink flowers I did not see earlier. It's beautiful and serene. It feels like I'm inside of a fairy tale. But as I continue to glance around, I realize that this cannot be real, and at the same time, this is not home.

I am not home.

It must be a green screen, right? It's all fake. It must be. Something like this does not exist.

Reaching across myself, I grab hold of a piece of skin on my arm and pinch it. Hard. I whimper and realize I am, without a doubt, not dreaming. That freaking hurt. I knew I wasn't dreaming, though, and sleepwalking is out of the question because I am not in California at all.

Beautiful land aside, I'm in a fucking nightmare.

My heart starts to race, my palms become sweaty, and my breathing turns labored. I don't know what's happening to me, but it feels like I want to claw my skin off. It's all too much, and I'm terrified.

When the door creaks open, I'm a trembling, shaking mess—almost violently quaking. A woman breezes through the door before it closes again and the sound of the lock slamming into place vibrates throughout the room.

I don't know who closed the door or what that person was wearing or looked like. Because all I can do is stare at this woman. She's seemingly floating across the hard stone flooring. I can hear her feet gently pad across the stone, so I know she's walking, but with the naked eye, it seems as if she's floating.

If I stare hard enough, I think she's actually see-through, but when I blink, she becomes solid again. She's stunning. Her blonde hair is so light it's almost white, and her blue eyes are the color of clear water. It's amazing, and she's beautiful. Her alabaster skin is so smooth that she appears almost porcelain.

She looks like a doll.

A walking, well, floating doll.

"Who are you?" the woman asks, her voice floating throughout the room like a whisper, her accent the same as the man's who was in bed with me. Sucking in a deep breath, I let it out slowly as I stare at her, wondering what the hell I'm supposed to say.

Instead of asking any questions, I decide to tell her my name. "Helmi," I state.

"Meri," she says, repeating the name he used earlier.

I tilt my head to the side as my eyes search hers. I don't know who or what Meri is, but it is not me. "My name is Helmi," I say, repeating myself.

She shakes her head slowly, then clears her throat. "Your name is Meri, and you've just become queen of Maapallo."

"*Of what?*" I ask.

"Maapallo," she repeats. "And this language we're speaking is not your native tongue."

She must be high.

This is and has always been my native tongue, but she's saying it's not, and I don't freaking understand any of it. I watch as her brows knit together in confusion as if she cannot understand how I am so bewildered by the name of this country. A place that, as far as I know, doesn't exist. I mean, I'm no expert on geography, but I have never heard of this country... *ever*.

"Okay," I exhale. "Let's forget the fact I'm not sure this is a real name for any country, but how did I get here? And what the hell language are you speaking? I went to sleep in my own bed. What the hell is happening? Did he kidnap me?"

Her breath hitches, then her eyes widen before they narrow on me. Slowly, she begins to approach me, tilting her head to the side, her eyes searching my own before she stops just a few feet away—close enough to touch.

"What's *your* name?" I ask, deciding if she's going to be in my face, I should at least know her name.

"Anja," she whispers as she lifts her hand and places her palm against my chest.

It's in this moment that I realize I'm still naked. I have the sheet wrapped around my body, but I have been flip-flopping between terrified and mesmerized, so I haven't really thought about what I'm wearing.

And what I'm wearing is absolutely freaking nothing except for a sheet, a *thin* emerald-green sheet. Looking down, I wonder if everything can be seen through it, and it can. I try

to hide myself a bit more, but it is no use. With the sun streaming through the open window, everything is on display.

Anja pulls her hand back, almost as if it's been burned, and looks at her palm before she shifts her attention back to meet mine. "What world are you from?" she asks on a whisper.

"World?" I ask. "Earth."

I don't know what else to say or what she expects me to say, and I feel really stupid saying Earth, but she is staring at me like I'm... unreal. The same way I was looking at the colors of the landscape... *fantastical*.

"Yes, but where are you from? It is not this world."

Her words are whispered, and it's clear she doesn't wish anyone to hear her, although I don't know who is going to. It's just the two of us in this room together. Glancing around, I check to make sure there is no one else here hiding in the corner or something. Blinking, I realize that there are no corners to a circular room and that it's clearly just the two of us.

"I'm from California, in the United States, on planet Earth. Is this some kind of prank or something? Did my brother do this? Because honestly, he's not really a prankster these days, but I could see him coming up with some elaborate thing for my birthday, and since this is a milestone birthday, maybe he did it."

Anja stares at me, blinking a few times as if she is not only completely lost by my rambling but confused and shocked, all rolled into one. So, I do what I do, and I continue rambling.

"Nilo," I call out. "Are you here?"

I wait for a few seconds, leaning to the side slightly so I can watch the door to see if he's going to burst through laughing at any moment. It doesn't happen. In fact, nothing happens.

"Nilo isn't here, is he?" I ask slowly.

Anja shakes her head from side to side. "He is not. However, tell me more about your milestone."

“I’m twenty-one,” I whisper. “Today.”

She presses her lips together, then leans in a bit closer. My gaze flicks from her to the door and back to her, over and over again, until she speaks. Until she asks me a question that shocks the shit out of me, even though it shouldn’t, because there is no way I could be any more surprised than I am right now... until this new question.

She places her hand on my chest again and closes her eyes, then slowly opens them, her gaze meeting mine. “I’m not a *noita*, but thankfully, I am able to do this for you. You can now understand and speak our language. It will make your life here much easier. But I have one more question for you.”

“What?” I ask, my lips forming and moving in a way they never have before.

She just gave me the ability to speak this language, and I am beyond confused about what’s happening here as I stand in this room completely naked.

“Are you a virgin?”

KARO

AS I WAIT FOR THE *TIETÄJÄ*, I PACE.

I’m unable to stand still. This entire situation is unnerving. Runo watches me, unspeaking, although I know he is assessing. He has plenty of thoughts going through his head, and I know he’d like to voice them, but he isn’t going to unless I ask him to. I don’t wish to hear them right now.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I open my mouth to ask him what his problem is when the door opens and the *tietäjä* saunters in wordlessly. I stare at her, wondering why these women are so soft and beautiful to the eye when they are indeed not on the inside. She may be a healer and not a full-blown *noita*, but I know she carries the underworld inside of her. She must.

“My name is Anja,” the *tietäjä* announces. “That is how I wish for you to refer to me.”

“Indeed,” I murmur.

She arches a brow, then clears her throat. “I will stay here until this matter is resolved. However, I will need to have someone search for a *noita* by the name of Ilta. She is the only one I am aware of who is strong enough to have done this.”

“Done what, exactly?”

“Spirited this woman in that chamber from a parallel universe, from another world.”

I stare at her, unable to think, let alone respond to her outrageous claim. Closing my eyes, I let out a heavy sigh before I reopen them. I try not to laugh, but her words are filled with hilarity. Taking a step toward her, I pause, lifting my hand and running my fingers through my hair, tugging on the ends.

“Are you *mad*?” Runo asks, taking the words from my mouth. “Another world?”

She dips her chin in a single nod. “Another world. There are dozens of parallel universes. She is from one of them. Some are good, some are not.”

“You’re telling me that my bride is from another world, and I am supposed to just take this as the truth? Who has sent you here to lie to your king?” I ask.

Anja doesn’t move. Her eyes shift from the color of pure water to a deep, dark cerulean. I stare at her, unable to speak as she changes in front of me, shifts, and then she smiles. The curve of her lips pulls up slowly on each side until it is almost too big.

Only then does she speak.

“I did not come here. I was sent for... fetched, if you will. This is not something I planned or had previous knowledge of. So, nobody has sent me here, and I am not a liar, Your Highness.”

Turning my head, I look toward the door and call out for Timo, my personal assistant. He is the only man who I can truly trust aside from Runo. He slips into the room, staying silent until I issue my order.

“Go to the village and bring me the *noita*, Ilta, immediately.”

Timo dips his chin before silently turning from me, then he rushes out of the room, on his way to do as I’ve bid him. Shifting my attention back to Anja, I clear my throat, trying to make sense of her words.

“Was this woman, who is from another world, the one that I married and consummated my marriage with last night?” I ask. I don’t know why this is important. It shouldn’t be. The woman, if this is the truth, she is my bride’s double in appearance... in every way.

“This woman is untouched, King. Therefore, I do not believe she is the one with whom you lay with last eve.”

What does this mean? I do not understand what’s happened. Meri didn’t leave the bed last night, and I know that without a doubt I broke her virgin seal last eve. I witnessed the blood myself.

“Where is my wife, then?” I ask. “Where is the queen?” My last word comes out on a roar.

Spinning around, I walk to the window and stare out, seeing nothing in particular. I am unsure of what to do exactly. I did not wish to marry yet, anyway. I did not have a choice. But now she’s been taken from me. The chosen one.

The sun spun, and each year brought me closer to the day.

Then it came.

There was nothing to be done. The curse was the curse, then the gods made their demands clear.

But all that has changed now. Suddenly, the woman in my chamber is possibly not my bride. I do not know why this has happened, but she could be a trick. Could she not? Therefore, I shall not treat her as my bride. Not until I have some answers.

“She will go to the tower,” I decide, my words coming out softer.

This was not what I wished for my marriage, but at the same time, I had known that it could be a possibility. This

marriage is not a love match, as the kings in my country do not have the luxury of marrying for feelings.

Our companions are chosen, special women who are born on the new moon, the exact day of birth as the current prince, ten years after his birth to the date and time. That baby child is taken to the convent's tower and raised there in secrecy, protected as the future queen of the country until her twenty-first birthday.

Then she is to be wed.

And my bride was born on my tenth birthday. Her name is Meri. She was taken to the tower just like the others and locked away until last evening. When the matches don't work out, usually, once an heir and a spare are secured, the brides are taken back to said tower, their companions moved elsewhere to stay until their death.

Then, when the cycle begins again, the babes are sent to that tower and a new set of staff is brought in as they and the exiled queen help raise the future queen.

The child, unknowing that it's her mother-in-law rearing her.

And the cycle repeats. Except this girl, a stranger from another world, if that is even the truth, she will go straight to the tower. The curse and foreboding be damned. There will be no babes, there will be no spares. Not until I discover what has truly happened.

Chapter Three

HELMI

I'M NOT SURE HOW LONG I STAND AND STARE AT THE CLOSED door after Anja walks... no, she floats out of the room and heads to places unknown. I've been here for a few hours, and I've seen nothing other than these stone walls that surround me.

I think I'm okay with all of that, though, because I still have nothing to wear except the extremely thin sheet. Staring at the closed door, I wait for it to open again. But it doesn't. Eventually, I turn my back to that door again and make my way to the window.

I love this window and watching the world around me. It's really the perfect place for me, especially with all the chaos surrounding me and the unknown. I'm an observer anyway, never one to need to be in the middle of anything.

The center of attention is not where I am comfortable. Never have been. I'd rather be off to the side, standing against the wall, in the dark and out of the limelight completely. It's just who I am.

So, watching the world from this window, several stories in the air, taking in everything, even if it's fake, it's still beautiful, and I enjoy it. As I stare at the overly bright landscape, I think about Anja's words. I know she claims this is real, that I was brought here from my world, and that this is a different one, but I don't believe her.

It can't be real... can it?

I've never heard of anything like this before. Wouldn't I have at least heard murmurings of this being a possibility? It seems far too fantastical to be true.

It seems like this truly is some elaborate prank, and I'm still not ruling out Nilo, but at the same time, this feels way too big for him. My brother isn't lazy, but he's certainly not this creative, and there is no way he'd spend money like this just to prank me.

I'm skeptical of everything happening right now, and there are dots out there, but I just can't quite connect them.

The door creaks behind me, and I contemplate turning around to see who is making their way into my small room, but I decide against it. I'm not sure it matters who walks in at this point. I'm not even sure if I'm really here or if I'm in some kind of dream state.

It's not like I have any control at all whatsoever over any of this. I'm just a naked girl locked in a room. Completely and totally scared out of my mind but also numb to everything that's going on.

"Turn around," a soft voice calls out.

Slowly, I follow her instructions, turning around to face her. I'm not sure who I expect to see, maybe Anja, but it's not her. It's not Anja, but whoever this woman is, she is very similar to her. She's ethereal, unreal, and almost floating as she stands a few feet away from me. Except for one thing—there is a darkness that lurks beneath her gaze, one that I can't figure out at first look, which does not match Anja's vibe at all.

The woman lifts her hand to her mouth, her fingers pressing against her lips as she gasps. "You look just like her," she exhales.

I'm assuming she's referring to this Meri person, but when she rushes toward me, it's so quickly that I stumble backward, slamming my back against the stone wall behind me. I let out a quiet cry.

She stops directly in front of me, her eyes searching mine, unbothered by my obvious panic. I expect her to speak, but she doesn't. Instead, she leans in, her face so close that her lips are almost touching mine.

"You're from the smoky, loud world, aren't you?" she asks on a whisper.

Her question takes me off guard. I have to think about it, then I can't help but let out a laugh because the way she describes California is pretty spot on. Smoky and loud. Although the beach isn't that way, the city is exactly like that.

"I am," I murmur.

Her eyes widen, then she takes a step backward. "It worked," she gasps. "It worked."

It's clear that she is in disbelief and awe at the same time as she watches me. Then she shakes her head as if she's jolting herself out of whatever stupor she's in. I stare at her, watching her in my own disbelief because I'm not exactly sure what she's implying when she is saying that it worked... *What worked?*

I open my mouth to ask her what the hell is going on, but then I decide to wait and see if she explains herself. There is silence for what feels like hours but probably just a few moments, then her head bobbles a couple of times before she lets out a heavy sigh.

"The gods came to me," she whispers. "They told me that you were the chosen one for our king, not the woman who was already here. She wasn't truly his match. They conveyed to me that I needed to bring you here, and you're here. You really are here. *I did it.*"

I don't know if she's excited, horrified, or what, but right now, I can't stop myself from quaking. I'm so unnerved by what she's just told me.

"Are you telling me that you brought me to this place? Did you drug me? What is happening?"

My questions spill out as my heart races. My panic grows again. This isn't a prank by Nilo. This isn't some random

dream. This is reality, and I am instantly terrified. Fear completely consumes me again. The waves of emotion I've dealt with in the past few hours are seriously intense, and it doesn't seem like they'll be stopping anytime soon.

She is so damn excited, and I'm so freaking scared.

My knees give out beneath me, and I sink down to my ass on the hard stone floor, bringing my bent legs up to my chest in an attempt to make myself smaller, unseen, unnoticed, but it doesn't work because it's just the two of us in this room.

"You're scared," she whispers. "Please don't be."

Lifting my head, I rest my chin on the center of my knees and stare at her for a long moment in silence. I'm not sure what to say right now. Her telling me not to be scared doesn't make me less frightened. In fact, it's almost as if it causes my panic and anxiety to become worse than it was a few moments ago.

"This is a good thing. The curse will stay at bay. I do not know why Meri, who everyone thought was the chosen one, is not. But this means you've been found, you've been brought to the king, and now the curse will not come to fruition."

"I don't understand," I exhale. "I don't understand any of this."

She slides her tongue across her bottom lip and then gives me a small smile. "My name is Ilta. And this is not for us to understand, Helmi. It is what has been demanded by the gods, and they will reveal their reasons for it all later, but we must trust them as they do not make mistakes."

I almost laugh, except I'm too numb to do that right now. This whole thing is so confusing but mostly so unbelievable that I just stare at her, unsure of what to say or think. Ilta stands, giving me her sad smile, then takes a step backward.

"You will see," she rasps. "It will be good for you, for the king, for the country."

KARO

THE *NOITA* WALKS BACK INTO THE ROOM, A SMILE PLAYING ON her lips. Almost an expression of triumph on her face. I watch her, wondering what she's discovered and at the same time questioning if she'll die with that smile on her face for what she's done because it is clear to me that she indeed has *done* something.

The woman curtsies as is her duty, but I care not for formalities in this moment. "Tell us, what has happened to the queen?" Anja asks before anyone else can speak.

The *noita* turns to face the other woman. "The queen is up in that room," she replies before her gaze swings around to meet mine. "Meri is not the true queen. She never was. The gods made that very clear to me. This woman is the queen. She was meant to be the queen, and that is what she will be."

I am not a man who takes kindly to anyone telling me anything. "Excuse me?" I ask.

She dips her chin in a slight nod, and I can hear Runo chuckle somewhere in the background, mainly because he knows I am on the edge of completely and totally losing my mind. I will kill her if her answers do not align with what I believe to be the truth.

"The gods came to me. They told me that the true match, the one who was meant to keep the curse at bay, was born in a different world. It was up to me, being the only *noita* in this country strong enough to bring her here."

"And where is the woman who I not only married but bedded last eve?" I demand.

The woman in that room is not my bride. I know that she is not, and both of *these women* are telling me the same. Gods be damned, I need to know where my bride is and what I am going to do with this creature that's taken her place.

"She is safe," the *noita* rasps. "But she is none of your concern. The woman up in that room is your wife from this moment onward."

Shifting my gaze to Anja, I growl, and thankfully, she understands my annoyance. She takes a step forward, moving

toward the *noita*. I watch as she takes both of her hands and squeezes them. I am confused and angry, unsure of what to do next. I need all the information, and I feel as though I do not have it at this moment.

As a king, it is my duty to keep my country safe. I do not know who or what that thing is in my room, where it came from or why it's there other than what this *noita* is telling me. That the gods visited her. The truth of her claim I am still unsure of.

This whole situation makes me feel as if I've lost control, and I cannot do that—ever.

“You used dark magic, Ilta,” she whispers. “You know this is forbidden.”

“It was not with ill intent,” Ilta states. “The gods came to me. They told me what I needed to do.”

“How did you get Meri in the middle of the night?” I demand. “I lay beside her the entire eve. So, how did you get into the castle, take her, and replace her with this creature? I do not believe that any of this is reality.”

The woman smiles, her gaze flicking to Anja, then slowly back to me. “I never left my home, Your Highness.”

“You used magic to come into the castle?” My words come out on a roar, and though I'm burning with anger, she seems unbothered by my ire.

Runo stands from his seat, moving toward our group, and levels the two women with a gaze. “How are we to know that you have not sent in a shape-shifter of sorts as a way to get to the king?”

His question is clear and logical. If I did not feel as though my mind were spinning, even flying through the sky, I would probably have thought of it, but this is something I've never dealt with before, and I find it hard to believe that this woman would do what she's done so brazenly and unapologetically.

Just as the *noita* opens her mouth to attempt to speak, there is a loud scream, then I hear my men shouting. Turning my

head toward the noise, I watch as my head guard runs into the room, his eyes wide and his face white.

“It’s a dragon.”

“The dragon is here again,” the *noita* whispers.

Turning to her, I tilt my head to the side. “*Again?* What is this you speak of?”

“The dragon. Last night, it was above my home when I spirited Meri away and brought your fated bride here to you.”

Lifting my hand, I point my finger at the guard. He is as trusted as any of them, and I know he will do what I say and won’t allow a woman, witch or otherwise, to beguile him away from his duties.

“Stay with these two. Do not let them out of your sight. Lock them in the dungeon if you must.”

He jerks his chin in response, not a single word spoken.

I don’t look at the women. They are no longer my concern for the moment, although I will be revisiting the situation once I’ve dealt with the new one at hand. The dragon takes precedence over anything else, especially since I’ve never actually seen one before, only hearing about them in fables.

Runo follows behind me, no doubt just as excited at the prospect of seeing a dragon as I am. We make our way outside. Lo and behold, there is a dragon sitting back on its haunches, his head tilted to the side, watching my soldiers as they surround it. Completely and totally unbothered.

The dragon itself isn’t what has my mouth parted in awe. It’s the man, the woman, and the girl who are climbing down from the beast’s back. People guide this dragon. It is under their control. My entire body is at attention but also frozen in awe.

“If you didn’t live on an island in the middle of nowhere, we could have come on a boat,” the man announces.

“Excuse me?” I call out.

“I am Lachlan McQuarrie, king of Sgaldachadh, and this is my bride, Neòil, the queen of Sgaldachadh,” he announces. Then he smiles and jerks his chin toward the girl, although I already know exactly who she is. “And this is Princess Kenna.”

Runo hisses behind me, but I cannot look to gauge his reaction. This is his first look at his future bride. My eyes are focused on this king, and I’m wondering why he is here. On a dragon. Without warning or announcement of arrival.

“I’d like a meeting with my sister’s future family. We must discuss some things,” he rumbles.

Stepping to the side, I dip my chin. “Then a meeting you shall have,” I call out. “Though it must be important if you’re bringing a mythical creature to have said meeting.”

His lips twitch into a grin. “The dragon is my wife’s friend, though I must admit it is nice when you have to travel quickly.”

Without another word, we walk into the castle together. I order the staff to gather refreshments for my guests and walk them into the gathering room. It won’t be completely private, although nothing is in a castle anyway. There are eyes and ears lurking around every corner.

I just hope that they do not know of my own ceremony and ask about *my* bride. I cannot hide her away, and I cannot display her either. So, it would be awkward, to say the least. Perhaps I’ll be lucky, and they will be so eager to speak of their reasons for coming here that they will not ask about my bride or marriage.

One can hope.

Chapter Four

KARO

THE KING, QUEEN, AND PRINCESS SIT ACROSS FROM ME AND Runo in my receiving area. Although the princess and Runo may as well be somewhere else, they stare at one another, unblinking, perhaps even unbreathing.

It is clear that they are both enamored by one another's physical appearances, which bodes well for their upcoming nuptials.

"Please," I say, dipping my chin in an offering to the trays of food and drink that are being taken from person to person.

"Thanks to you," the king murmurs as he takes some ale and a roll with cheese and meat stuffed into the center.

He stares at the food, likely unsure of what it is. Unlike most people from Maapallo, I've traveled the world and have spent time off the large island we all call home. I know that the way we do things isn't always customary in other countries... like eating meat and cheese inside of a roll instead of separately.

"Oh, a sandwich," the queen cries out, taking two.

"You've had these before?" I ask. "Made this way?"

She nods her head, then takes a bite and chews it. I watch as she swallows, her eyes widening. "Almost like this. Meat, cheese, lettuce, tomato, then some mayo and maybe mustard. Sometimes some oil and vinegar...oh, and a pickle."

I have no idea about half of what she's said. "As you can tell," the king begins, "my wife isn't from our world."

My eyes widen, and I blink a few times. *World*. Did he just say that she isn't from our world? Instead of asking him, I clear my throat and reach for a glass of ale, taking a long pull. I do not know how to respond to that or if I even should.

Instead, I decide to watch and wait, knowing he has something else to say. I'm not sure I wish to show my hand quite yet. I'm not even certain that the woman upstairs in my chambers is my bride. Just because the *noita* claims she's spirited someone from another world here does not make it true.

I will remain skeptical until I see and hear proof. I am not someone who believes in things I cannot see. Except the curse, it's been part of my country, my family, for so long that it is ingrained in me as a person.

This is not that.

"My wife is from a parallel universe. She was spirited here," he states. "She was able to fight the curse of my country, and the same has happened in Katrauina. We believe this will happen in threes. Since you're the only other king who has married recently, we came here wondering if your new bride is perhaps from another world?"

Leaning back in my chair, I watch him for a moment. So, he knows about my bride, and yet he has not asked about her. Pressing my lips together, I think about how I wish to answer this. Lifting my hands, I press them together in front of my lips.

"And what happens if she is?" I ask.

Lachlan sits up a bit straighter. The queen leans forward a little farther. They are filled with hope, but I do not believe this is real. I believe nothing is genuine in this world... that no person is genuine. Everyone wants something. They have some kind of angle, whether we want to believe it or not.

These two are no different, and the fact that they brought the princess here proves that they are dangling a carrot for

leverage.

“Then the darkness, the demons, the underworld will come to the surface. When they do, all three women need to be together. We think it will be the only way they will be able to fight and win.”

“Win?” I ask.

“Rid this world of the curse and the underworld for good.”

There it is. He thinks that these women, these people who are supposedly from another world, will somehow have magic and be able to save the world from curses that have been in place for generations. To save the world from the gods of the underworld.

Not. Likely.

“This is a dream,” I say. “You think that some women from a faraway land are going to save the world? You must jest.”

Lachlan’s lips twitch into a smile. He doesn’t look perturbed or annoyed in any way. Instead, he looks amused. It’s clear that he thinks this is comical. I could be droll as well, although he would probably not laugh if I were.

“I know they will. If she is not here yet, she will be. And then you will see. We will keep in touch, King Kano,” he says as he stands. “When you are ready to fight and win the underworld, please do not hesitate to contact me.”

Standing, I dip my chin. “I’ll see you at the wedding, then?” I ask.

“We shall be here, though I believe we will come by boat next time.”

“It would be appreciated, although I am curious as to how you are able to travel on the beast.”

Lachlan’s lips twitch, but it’s the queen who stands and speaks first. It is clear that she is not of this world just by the words she uses.

“It seems too fantastical to be true. I know this. I also know that when I arrived, I was terrified. Soleil of Katrauina

helped me to acclimate to this world. If you'll allow me, I would like to help your bride as well."

"That is if my bride is of your world?"

She smiles as she shakes her head just once. "Yes, King Kano. That is *if* she is of my world. Also, I would like to say that we have magic here. We, three women from our world, have no control over it. We have no idea when it will come or go, but it will help us fight the underworld. And together, I believe the three of us will prevail."

"We will see you soon for the nuptials," Lachlan murmurs. "And if you need help in any way, send for us. We shall come."

Without another word, the three of them, king, queen, and princess, walk out of the room and to their beast. Runo and I follow behind them, though we keep our distance. I watch as they climb onto the beast before it lifts into the air, its gigantic wings flapping as they leave my country.

"Do you believe them?" I ask Runo, not looking away from the majestic beast.

"I want to."

"Because you want the girl?"

He chuckles, and I turn to look at him. His gaze slides to mine, and his lips twitch into a smile.

"I do find her attractive and am intrigued by her seemingly bright spirit. However, I already have the girl as she's betrothed to me. So, I *want* to believe them because I wish to, not because I need to."

He's right. To a degree. "How did they know she would be here? Do you think they had a hand in this?"

"You think everything is a conspiracy. It's logical. You've just married."

"And you give people too much credit," I grunt.

Runo lets out a chuckle. "Then let us find out the truth of it all. We have two women and your bride who we can talk to

and get to the bottom of this. Then we will decide if they are truthful and what the next steps are that need to be taken.”

He’s right, of course. I am someone who is suspicious of everyone—their thoughts, their actions, and their motives. It comes with the territory of always having to watch out for yourself. Being next in line to the throne has always been a heavy burden, although not as heavy as actually being king.

HELMI

SUCKING IN A BREATH, I TRY TO CALM MYSELF, BUT IT doesn’t work. This is too much. I’m too scared. I’m trembling, and all I want to do is go home. Tears fill my eyes, and for the first time, I really think about the fact I may never see my family again.

What if I’m really in some parallel universe time-warp thing? What if this is all true, an alternate reality?

The door flies open. It slams against the wall hard, and I stare at the door as it swings back because it looks heavy as hell, and I can’t believe it could actually fly like that. A throat clears, and I shift my attention to the man behind the sound.

It’s the one whom I woke up naked beside this morning. The handsome man who claims to be my husband but I’ve never seen before today. And as I stare at him, I wonder why he would want some stranger in his bed... he’s beautiful.

Well... he’s beautiful in a rugged way. He’s got hair that skims his shoulders. It’s curly and dark blond. His bright blue eyes hold me captive. He’s tall, and his shoulders are broad. Plus, I know from seeing him without clothes on that he’s packed with muscle.

He takes a step inside, then another, and I watch as the two women from earlier float in behind him. They stop on either side of him. There is another man in the background. He looks like a younger version of this angry beast in front of me.

“Stand,” he demands.

Slowly, I stand to my feet, clutching the sheet close to me, knowing that all these people are looking at me naked because the sheet hides nothing. And just when I open my mouth to say something about my nakedness and the people, my stomach grumbles.

The grumpy, sexy man in front of me turns his head. He barks an order, and even my back straightens at the tone and inflection of his voice. “Bring food to your queen.”

His attention flicks back to me. “Queen?” I whisper. I almost laugh at the ridiculous title... *queen*.

How can that even be possible?

“You need to dress. We have much to discuss.”

He’s so matter-of-fact, and I want to do what he’s demanded, mainly because I’ve never had anyone demand anything of me before like this. He’s rough and rugged. His voice causes chills to slide down my spine.

He’s an alpha male.

I didn’t think they really existed. I don’t think I’ve ever really met one before aside from my brother and father, and he’s even more than they are. He’s off the charts. I can’t do anything except stare at him.

The silence surrounds us. Nobody says a single word as they wait for me to speak first. Every person in this room stares right at me, waiting for me to address this. Expecting me to speak. Sucking in a breath, I hold it for a moment, then let it out slowly.

“I don’t have any clothes,” I finally whisper.

He arches a brow, then, without a word, he spins around and marches away. I watch as he leaves the room. His ass looks just as good as his front. Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I shift my attention, flicking my gaze back and forth between the women who continue to stare.

My back straightens when the man, my husband, the king, starts to shout. I hear him call for a maid and my heart races. I don’t want anyone to have to do anything for me, but at the

same time, I don't want to be naked either. I'll never speak up for myself.

Ilta takes a step toward me, her gaze searching mine for a long moment before she gives me a small smile. "You will save this world, Helmi. I can feel it in my gut."

The king waltzes back into the room, his eyes leveling me with a stare. "The maid is bringing you some clothes, then you will go to the tower until we know what you are."

"What I am?" I ask.

He jerks his chin. "A person does not simply appear from another world. You are not human, and I will discover what is happening here. I will also find my true bride."

My heart slams against my chest.

He doesn't think I'm human.

What the hell?

"Take her away." His words are spoken, and they are harsh and final.

Chapter Five

HELMI

I'M NOT SURE HOW LONG IT TAKES, BUT THE WOMEN STAY WITH me, as do a couple of men who are dressed like some kind of soldier. At least, that's what I assume they are. They do not look like random friendly townspeople... not that I would know what random friendly townspeople look like in this crazy place.

These guys are wearing breeches and boots, though. They have on long-sleeved tunics with thick belts at the waist, and each has a sword hanging from his hip. They also have chain mail on their shoulders, and their faces are expressionless as they stare straight at me.

I can't look away from them. I'm frozen as the reality of what is happening to me begins to truly sink in. It hits me. I don't think I'm going home... not today, not tomorrow, maybe not ever. I'm stuck wherever I am, even though I don't really believe I'm in some other dimension. There's just no way. It can't be possible.

But kidnapped? *Yes.*

That I would believe.

Drugged while I slept, transported to someplace in the middle of nowhere, living in some weirdo's fantasy world? *That is possible.*

But a whole parallel universe? *I just don't buy it.*

I shift my attention to the two women. They seem to be the only ones who might possibly be able to find a way to get me home or really tell me anything about what's happening here. I clear my throat. I'm not sure what exactly I'm going to ask, but I have a million questions... one thing in particular stands out to me.

Opening my mouth, I start to ask them for *help* when another woman waltzes into the room carrying a bundle of fabric in her hands. Everyone's attention swings over to her, including my own.

"The queen's wardrobe," she announces.

Anja takes the fabric from her and then dismisses her, but she doesn't leave immediately. I watch as she stares at me for a long moment, then she finally spins around and walks swiftly out of the room without a single word.

Ilta turns to the men, who continue to stare at me, although now it's no longer expressionless... they appear almost... *hungry*. It's making me extremely uncomfortable. I'm sure it's because I'm standing here in the see-through gauzy sheet, but still, it's scary and uncomfortable.

"You may leave. The queen requires privacy," Ilta states.

Their bodies jerk as if they're stunned by her demand. Much to my surprise, they do what she says. My lips press together as my eyes widen in shock that they're following her orders. They turn around and walk out of the room, closing the door behind them.

Opening my mouth, I begin to ask them what's going on when they both reach out to me and take the sheet from my body. The words that are on the tip of my tongue vanish as I let out a gasp, unable to cover everything with just my hands, not that they would let me anyway.

They start to tug pieces of fabric over me, thankfully hiding my nakedness, then they pull and yank, wrap things around, and in about five minutes, I'm clothed. The material isn't like anything I've ever felt before. It's almost like a stiff linen.

They guide me a few steps to the left and then step away. I didn't see the mirror here earlier, but as I stare at my reflection in a dress so beautiful and yet so foreign, I wonder what kind of world I'm in.

This cannot be real. I refuse to believe that it could be. I don't understand any of it. Sliding my palms down the front of the dress, I let out a heavy sigh. It feels luxurious, and I look beautiful. I've never really felt beautiful before, but in this dress that highlights all the good parts of my body, I really do feel stunning.

"The King wishes for you to be taken to the tower," Anja announces.

"What does that mean?" I ask.

She looks at her shoes, then slowly lifts her gaze to meet mine. "We do not know what that means for the future of the country or the fate of this world, but for you, it means you'll be locked away until he's decided that you are meant to be his intended."

I don't like the sound of any of that. "Anja," I call out, "please explain these things to me. Fate of the world?"

She shifts her attention from me to Ilta, then back to me as she clears her throat. "The gods have made it very clear. The king of the country must marry and create life with the chosen one in order to keep the curse at bay. In order to keep the underworld from finding its way back up."

"And if this doesn't happen?" I ask, knowing full well that unless there is such a thing as immaculate conception here, I'm not going to be pregnant anytime soon. Also, I don't plan on *ever getting* pregnant by this man who I don't even know, so their plan is completely flawed. I don't say that, though. Instead, I just wait for her to finish.

"It must happen. If the underworld breaches the surface, reaching *our* surface, it will be the end of life as we know it. People will die. Chaos will abound. It will be a certain death to all. So, it is not something we would like to see, and up until

this point, the people of the past have been able to keep it at bay.”

As I process her words, I do feel bad for them, but at the same time, I have no control over any of this. I’m a stranger in this place, a place that I’m not even certain is real. A plight that I am not positive even exists.

“I hope it doesn’t come to that,” I whisper, unsure of what else to say.

Anja smiles at me through the reflection of the mirror. “We will ensure that it does not,” she exhales. “That is if you will allow us?”

I think about her words. I want to say hell no, take me home. But at the same time, I don’t think she will. She may not have the power to do so, either. I could ask her that, but I assume that if this was something she was going to do, she’d have already done it by now.

“I don’t know what I want,” I say. “I’m scared and confused.”

Admitting that is something quite out of the ordinary for me. I’m not someone who always says how I feel, but these women are my only allies. God knows that man isn’t going to have a conversation with me. Not that I could even really speak to him. He’s too beautiful.

“We will help you,” Ilta states.

Turning my head, I look at her, my lips pressed together as I frown. “I don’t want you to help me. I want you to send me home.”

She frowns, then clears her throat. “I cannot do that,” she exhales.

“Can’t or won’t?” I demand as tears fill my eyes. “I want to see my family. I want to see my brother, Nilo. I want to go home.”

Ilta at least has the good sense to look ashamed. But she doesn’t change her words, she doesn’t tell me that she’ll help me. Instead, she rocks back on her heels, sucks in a deep

breath, and lets it out slowly, her eyes shifting from mine to the floor and then back to meet mine.

“I cannot send you home, Helmi. The gods have spoken to me. They are the ones who told me to bring you here. Even if I defied them, which I would never, my magic is depleted.”

I want to believe her, but magic and everything she’s saying?

I just don’t.

KARO

MY BROTHER DOESN’T SPEAK AS WE WALK AWAY. I CAN FEEL his judgments, though. They are there. They are bright and shiny. Walking outside, I make my way toward the horse barn. He is behind me, and so is one of my men, my personal guard, Timo.

“Are you going to say it?” I demand.

“It is not my business to say anything,” he murmurs. “Not anything that has to do with me at all whatsoever.”

Walking to my horse, I lift my hand and run my fingers down his flank. He’s a large horse, larger than most as a Clydesdale. Most would call him more of a work animal, but he has been my partner for years, and there is no other animal I would have beneath me in battle.

“Tell me your thoughts, brother. It is just us out here... well, and Timo.”

Runo clears his throat, shaking his head a few times, then turns around so his back is to me. I wait for him. He’s thinking of what he wishes to say to me, taking his time and working through his thoughts, as he always does.

“I think you should take into consideration what the king and queen had to say about this entire situation. They knew she was from another world. They said there would be problems with the underworld. We need to heed their warnings, brother.”

He's right. We do.

But at the same time, I am not so sure that this woman is the chosen one, even if she is from the same world as Lachlan's bride. The simple fact is that I know absolutely nothing of her or of Ilta, who brought her here.

Not a single thing.

"Until I know what the truth is, if she is indeed from another world or if she is some sort of magical mirage or changeling, I will keep her in the tower."

"Do you think you will find Meri?" he asks.

The question lingers, swirling around, and I think about it for a long moment before I turn back to my horse. Stroking him, I let out a sigh, shaking my head.

"I think Meri is gone. It's true that I held no affection for her. I only met her the day of our wedding, but everything was so sudden."

Runo dips his chin. "It was, brother."

"I prefer to be in control," I grunt.

He lets out a chuckle. "You do. This is true. However, this is something that is not only out of your control but also unprecedented."

It is indeed that, on both accounts.

"What is the right answer here?" I ask, not just to my brother but more to myself.

I need to know the right thing to do, not just for myself and my bride, but also to appease the gods. Because when it comes down to it, if the gods are not satisfied, it could harm my people, our country... our world as we know it.

"There is not one. Do what you feel in your heart is the right thing."

"Heart?" I ask with an arch of my brow. "Heart means nothing when you are king, brother."

Runo lets out a roll of laughter. Taking a step toward him, I tilt my head to the side, unsure of why he's laughing and not truly appreciating it so much. When he finally catches his breath, his gaze finds mine, and he clears his throat a couple of times, trying to compose himself.

"You, brother," he begins. "You have heart. You rule with your heart, even if you don't think you do. It is part of you. The gods rule you, but, brother, you rule this land with your heart and soul."

I want to say he's wrong, that I am a tyrant who does what is needed, everything else be damned, but that isn't the case. He's right. I have a heart, and I rule with my heart, but at the same time, I know what is expected of me.

What my brother may not understand is that occasionally, there are times when you cannot rule with your heart. Even if that is what you wish to do. Even if it hurts to do it, sometimes there are no choices.

"I do when I can. But that is a luxury I do not always have available."

He hums, maybe understanding me, perhaps not. Walking over to the saddle that I know is mine, I grab hold of it and carry it to my horse, then begin to strap it on his back. Once the saddle is tightened, I climb upon my Clydesdale and glance at my brother.

"You say that you have no such luxury, but you do, Karo. This is a moment when you can look at it as not only what the gods have provided but also an opportunity to have this woman. She is alone and scared. Show her our world. Make her fall in love with you. She has no expectations. She hasn't been taught how to please you in every way. This may be fun."

Shaking my head, I tug on my horse's reins and start to leave the barn. Looking down at my brother, I glance directly at him, my gaze connecting with his before I speak.

"You are pushing hard for this, brother. Is this because you desire your promised bride and wish to impress her? Matters

not,” I grunt. “I shall return, though I am unsure when. Do not go in search of me.”

Clicking my tongue, I urge my horse to take off. Thankfully, he doesn't follow. I try not to think about what he's said about the heart, about the underworld. Instead, I try to think about my bride... or rather, *brides*.

I have a decision to make. I must spend some time by myself contemplating this decision. It is not typical for a king to vanish on his own, but this is not a typical situation. The kingdom will think nothing of me being away, as they will assume I am on my honeymoon with my bride.

None will be the wiser.

Chapter Six

HELMI

THE TOWER.

There is nothing in this room aside from a bathroom and a bed. Well, I shouldn't say nothing, because there is a rocking chair and a vanity, but it's pretty bare bones to say the least. Thankfully, the bathroom is behind a door. The bed is in the middle of the room. It's plain and simple. It kind of reminds me of a prison. My spine straightens.

"Am I in jail?" I ask, spinning around to look at the two women who have followed me here.

They shift their attention from me to one another, and that's when I know the truth. I am in jail. A nicer jail than probably what's down in what I assume is a dungeon, but a jail nonetheless. Neither of the women answers me. Their gazes instantly avoid mine.

"I'm in jail," I whisper.

"It's the tower," Anja states.

I almost laugh in her face, knowing damn well that this is not just a tower. This is a prison cell. "It's a jail," I state.

She presses her lips together. Ilta takes a step toward me, then another before she reaches out and takes my hand in hers. Her gaze searches my own for a long, silent moment before she lets out an exhale.

“This is a form of jail, indeed. But this is not a regular circumstance. You must know that the king is wary of you, of this situation. It will take him a little time before he comes around, but when he does, he will see that you are his match.”

Shaking my head from side to side, I press my lips together and roll them a few times before I speak.

“I am not his match. I am nobody’s match. I just want to go home.”

“You are home,” Ilta snaps.

It’s obvious that she’s upset, maybe even angry with me for asking to go somewhere else, but this is not my home. These are *not* my people, and I’ve been kidnapped.

“You will find that the king is a very wonderful man,” Anja murmurs.

Tears instantly fill my eyes. I’m in jail, I know nobody, and now the people who I thought were here to help me I find out they really aren’t. They are here to make sure that this plan of theirs works. That their king is pleased, that whatever these things are in the underworld don’t make their way to this one... none of which makes any damn sense to me.

I open my mouth to say just that when Ilta takes a step toward me. She tilts her head to the side, her eyes finding mine, then she smiles and turns toward Anja. “She is ready.”

Ready?

Ready for what?

I don’t even get the chance to ask my question because, in the next moment, Anja’s hand presses against my chest and my back bows as my eyes are forced closed. Images flash behind my eyelids, almost as if I’m watching a movie.

Death and destruction fill my vision, evil entities, almost demonic creatures, and then there is a sense of calmness, of peace, and these ethereal beings of light take over in the trance state that I’m in.

Then there is the king, the man who I recognize as my supposed husband. I can only see his profile. He is beautiful,

and my breath hitches at the sight of him. Then I gasp when he turns his head sharply, and instead of his pretty blue eyes, I find them black... even the whites.

Those black eyes focus on me as if he's truly seeing me standing in front of him. Then his mouth opens. My breath hitches as a big black dragon emerges from his mouth, tearing his body into pieces.

Anja's hand leaves my chest, my eyes open, and I gasp, falling to my knees as I try to catch my breath. I pinch my eyes closed but see nothing but visions of the black dragon, so I force them to open again.

"Helmi," a voice whispers from what sounds like both far away and underwater. "Helmi, you must calm yourself."

I let out a laugh as I try to compose myself. It doesn't work. I don't know what I've just seen, but it appeared to be real. The fear inside of my body was real, too. I can't just laugh it away, calm down, and forget about it.

I want to forget everything.

But I can't.

It's right there in the forefront of my mind, and the second I close my eyes, even to blink, it begins to play on repeat.

"Protect her," a voice shouts.

I feel a hand against my chest again, and I'm filled with a warmth that is so cozy that I let out a sigh. My eyes focus on Anja, who is crouched in front of me, her eyes on mine, a kind smile playing on her lips.

"Are you okay, My Queen?" she asks.

There is a moment of silence. I stare at her, no longer laboring to breathe, but at the same time, I am unable to speak coherently. I don't know what to say, what to do, what to think. I'm not really sure what's happened. So I don't answer her. Instead, I just stare straight ahead, unsure of what to say and do.

I'm frozen.

“Helmi?” Ilta whispers as she crouches down beside Anja, her eyes finding mine. Then she smiles and reaches for my hand. She squeezes it, then clears her throat. “Helmi. You need to come back to us.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I hold it, then let it out slowly. I try to come back to myself. It takes a moment, but I do. Blinking a few times, I shake my head, then force myself to stand and take a few steps away from the women.

“What was that?” I demand. “What. Was. That?”

“That was our world before the gods were able to defeat and suppress the underworld, and that was your king if this curse is unleashed onto the world again,” Anja states.

“Do you understand now why we need you?” Ilta asks. “Why I used all of my magic to spirit you here? It’s life and death for our people, for our world.”

I want to be a bitch and inform her that it may be life and death for her world, but it is in no way that for me and mine. It isn’t my problem, or at least it wasn’t until they brought me here and made it mine.

I do not want to be here.

“I want to go home,” I whisper as a tear trickles down my cheek. “This isn’t fun for me.”

Both women take a step backward as if I’ve physically assaulted them. “It is not fun for any of us. This is not pleasurable, Helmi. This is our country, our families. Only you can save us from a fate worse than death. Home is now here.”

“And my family?” I ask.

“The king and his brother, Prince Runo, are your family. The subjects are your family.”

Anja and Ilta share a glance between them. After a moment of silence, they both turn to face me.

“You must make him want you. You must make a baby with him, or that dragon, that darkness, that dread, it will become a reality, and there will be nothing that can be done to protect any of us.”

KARO

RIDING MY STEED HARD AND FAST, I GUIDE HIM TOWARD THE edge of the country, stopping him at the cliffs that lead to the beach and ocean below. My country is small, but we are mighty. An island that is by itself, hundreds of miles from anything else.

We are self-sufficient, we are secluded, and we are protected not only by our people but by our natural geography. But apparently, we are not immune to magic that happens from within. I don't know how to find the woman who married me yesterday. I do not know if I should even look for her.

The *noita* claims that the gods came to her. Perhaps she is lying, but if she is not, and I do not follow their desires, then my country suffers. Staring at the ocean, I watch as it moves, the waves rolling back and forth against the rocky shore.

“What shall we do?” I ask, patting my Clydesdale against the side of his neck as if he can answer me.

Silence surrounds me. Even the sounds of the waves crashing fades away. Something catches the corner of my eye. Turning my head to the side, I suck in a breath, holding it as my eyes widen at the sight of the vision that appears in front of me. I know I was here alone. The woman appears as a white translucent light before she turns solid.

“King Karo,” she greets me, her voice a luring siren's song.

“And you are?” I ask.

Her lips curve up into a smile as if she finds my question amusing. “I am the goddess Ilmater.”

My heart begins to beat faster at the revelation of her name. Goddess of the air. I am looking down at the goddess of the air. I find myself, probably for the first time in my entire life... speechless. I open my mouth but close it again, gnashing my teeth together as I wait for her to say something, to continue with her reason for appearing.

I've never been visited by a true god before. I stare at her in awe, unsure of how to react or respond. So instead of asking any questions, instead of attempting to speak, I wait for her to tell me why she's come all this way.

"You are the king of this beautiful land, and we do not wish to see it destroyed," she sings as she speaks. "You must create life with your chosen."

"Meri cannot be found," I state.

Her lips curve up, and she shakes her head once. "The woman you lay with last eve was not your intended. This one who appeared in this world to take her place, she is your destined bride. She is the only one who can fend off the underworld. Who can eradicate it and create a safe and happy life."

"Eradicate the underworld and the curse?" I ask.

"Yes, King Karo. Now that the three are here, it has all been set into motion."

Her body begins to turn translucent again as she begins to fade away. "What do you mean, set into motion?" I call out.

"In all due time, King Karo. Go to your bride."

The word *bride* is said barely above a whisper before she completely disappears before my eyes. I stare at the space she had inhabited and shake my head a couple of times, pinching my eyes closed before opening them again.

I don't know what I expect to see, but I'm a bit disappointed when she isn't there looking back at me, even though I know she has gone. Clearing my throat, I lean back in my saddle and tug on the reins.

The horse backs away from the cliff as I guide him to turn around. Instead of heading straight toward the castle to tell my brother and anyone else who will listen about the visit from the goddess, I follow her orders.

I head straight toward the tower where I've locked this woman away.

Chapter Seven

HELMI

“YOUR HAIR IS SO LONG,” ILTA MURMURS BEHIND ME. SHE’S brushing my hair as I stare at my reflection in the vanity mirror.

“I know,” I breathe. “I haven’t cut it since I was thirteen.”

And I haven’t. When I turned thirteen, my mom took me for a trim. I don’t know what the hairdresser was thinking, if she was nervous or what, but she ended up cutting my hair from my shoulders to just below my ears. I was traumatized. I never went to another hairdresser again.

In fact, I don’t really even get it trimmed much either. Only when I visit my mom and she forces me by practically tying me to a chair to do it for me. It’s been well over six months since I’ve been forced to have a trim, so it is really long. But for some reason, it feels lighter here. The heaviness that I normally feel tugging against my neck isn’t there.

“Why?” Ilta asks.

I don’t know if she’s trying to be nice or trying to get information from me. I suppose it doesn’t matter. It’s not like she could use anything I tell her against me in any way, not here in this place.

“I got a bad haircut, and I decided I was never going to let that happen again.”

Ilta chuckles, and Anja does the same from her place against the wall. She's sitting in a rocking chair, reading a book as she rocks back and forth. I don't know where she gets the books from, but every day, she walks in here with a new book, sits in that chair, and rocks while she reads.

It's been many days.

I've lost track of how long I've been in this tower. Each day is the same. I wake, I eat, I bathe, I dress, I wait. What I'm waiting for, I'm not sure. But I do wait... every single day. Then I eat some more, then I bathe, then I sleep.

Over and over.

"It's very beautiful. I do not think you should ever cut it," she whispers.

"I can grow it out, braid it, and let men climb up the braid from the bottom of the tower. I'll be the Rapunzel of your world," I say with a snort.

Anja stops rocking in her chair, and at the same time, Ilta stops brushing my hair. A hushed silence falls over the space. It's uncomfortable. Slowly, I turn my head and look over my shoulder at the women. They are staring at me in disbelief, their lips parted slightly.

"What?" I ask as I turn my body in the chair to face them, my smile dying on my lips.

They don't speak right away, their eyes focused on mine, their lips still parted in awe, as if I've said or done something completely shocking. I don't see how I could have. I haven't freaking moved from this damn room in God knows how long.

"You cannot have another man, no matter how he climbs into your bedroom," Ilta says.

I blink as I stare at her. Shaking my head a couple of times, I suck in a breath before I let it out and speak. "I know that in this world, I'm supposedly a queen, but I'm really not. What I am is a woman who has been kidnapped, held against my will and imprisoned. So, I'm sorry if you don't like my joke, but I haven't had *any* man. Therefore, it would be impossible to have *another* man."

“You are the queen, no matter what happens in the bedroom. You cannot have another man. You cannot have *any* man. Your children must be the king’s. You are the only hope for the country.”

Pressing my lips together, I roll them a few times, then turn away from the women, dipping my chin to stare at my feet. My bare feet. Because there is no reason for shoes in this place. Honestly, there is no reason for clothes either.

I’m uncertain why, but her words almost hurt me. I’m not sure they should, but it doesn’t change the fact that they indeed do. None of this still feels real, and yet, as the hours and days pass, as these words are spoken, it begins to sink in that this is a reality I didn’t ever expect out of life.

“There will be no children for the king, at least not from me. I’m a virgin. I’ve never spent more than five minutes with him. And I haven’t seen him in weeks,” I snap, my voice rising with each word I speak.

Silence fills the room all over again. I want to jump out of the window instead of throwing my hair over the side and letting someone climb up. I didn’t think the comment would be that big of a deal, but apparently, these witches are serious about it.

“He will return,” Anja states.

Will he though?

This man, from the few moments I’ve seen him and heard him shout in my presence, doesn’t seem like someone who would ever change his mind. So when he told them to lock me up in this tower, I am pretty sure that’s what he meant. But he forgot to verbalize the “to never be seen again” part.

“He won’t,” I whisper. “I’d like to be left alone now.”

Both women open their mouths to say something, but I hold up my hand and ignore them, brushing past them to walk to the window.

“Please, just leave me alone.”

Thankfully, they don't argue with me. In fact, they quietly slip out of the space, and I continue to stare out the window at the most beautiful landscape I've ever seen in my entire life. It's almost blindingly beautiful—the grass overly green, the ocean in the distance a brighter blue than I ever thought possible... it looks like a painting.

It doesn't seem real, and yet it is. It's my favorite thing to look at, and every time I get lost in the scenery around me, I think I could live here, I could stay here forever. Then I remember I'm in prison, and that thought vanishes.

As a prisoner, I can't experience any of it.

All I can do is watch from the outside looking in and think. Dream. Pray. I still want to go home. I miss my family, my brother, my parents—my bed.

Lifting my hand, I wrap my fingers around the side of the window, gripping the stone tightly, my nails digging into the rock, and I wonder what the hell this world has in store for me.

A world that I know nothing about.

A world that I don't want to be part of.

A world that wants no part of me. I don't have a place here. I don't have anything here. I've supposedly got a husband, one who wants nothing to do with me. A husband I've never even had sex with and don't want to have sex with. I'm alone, locked in solitude, and I have a feeling that if it were up to him, I would vanish completely.

Tears begin to stream down my cheeks, tears that I didn't think were even still possible. I've cried and cried a million of these things. I didn't think I had any left.

I'm not sure how long I stare at the rolling hills, but I don't even see the person who rides up on a horse. He stops just below me, and when I hear my name being called, I glance down, blinking a few times at the sight of the beautiful man on the gigantic horse.

He tips his head back, his eyes finding mine, and I expect to see the blackness that was in my vision, but it's not there. Cool blue meets my gaze, and my breath hitches at his

absolute beauty. His hair brushes his shoulders. It's wild and chaotic. Then his lips turn up into a smile and he winks.

"Hello, my bride," he calls out.

My bride?

What on earth?

"The King," I grumble.

He laughs, the sound reaching me. "Let down your hair, and I will climb to get to you faster than climbing the stairs."

I open my mouth to tell him to turn his ass back around, but then I realize he's saying exactly what I did just moments ago.

What the hell?

How did he know I said that earlier?

What is happening?

Is this more magic coming my way?

Sucking in a breath, I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. He tugs on the reins of his horse with a laugh, then he rides off past the tower, my tower, and toward... well, somewhere else. I'm not sure where because I can't see anything else around me, just straight ahead.

This is another completely bizarre moment that I should probably chalk up to the fact that I'm in some strange place, but it feels strange all around. It's not just a "this world" thing, but a generally odd moment. He went from being angry at the sight of me to laughing, joking, and winking? What the hell?

I should probably turn around, face the door, and wait for whatever is going to come through that space. Because this feels weird and off. I'm not sure what to expect or what is coming my way, but at the same time, I'm not sure I want to know either.

As I continue to stare out the window, I wonder if this man, a stranger who is also my husband, is going to come up to this room and do... I don't know what with me. Maybe this is a conjugal visit?

I would die.

Simply expire.

KARO

I RIDE AWAY FROM THE TOWER, HEAD DIRECTLY FOR THE BARN and jump off my steed. After a few instructions to the horse handler, I lift my hand in a wave and turn toward the building. A lone tower, with a smaller abbey-type building connected.

It's as isolated here as my entire country. An island all its own, away from the rest of the country, on a hill, in a tower. I've never been here before. The prince isn't allowed to visit his betrothed, so as a general rule, I only knew of the location. I've never actually set my gaze upon the tower itself before... at least not up close.

Making my way toward the building in hopes of finding my bride, I'm stopped by the guard. He watches me for a moment but doesn't speak. He also doesn't move out of my way. Tilting my head to the side, I watch him for a long moment in silence.

"May I pass?" I ask.

"State your purpose."

I smirk, wondering if he is jesting with me, but judging by the stern expression on his face, I am pretty sure he is serious.

"Your king needs no purpose. Stand to the side," I growl.

He has the good sense to jerk back slightly, his eyes widening as they find mine. "Your Highness," he murmurs, bowing instantly as he moves to the side to allow me to pass.

Wordlessly, I brush past him, ignoring my urge to throw him against the wall and pummel him with my fist. It is not his fault that I have never been here before, and he's probably not left his post since before he was a guard.

As I move through the abbey, I notice quite a few women who are moving in silence to and from their destinations. If they notice me, they don't react in any way.

This is different.

This situation has never happened before.

I climb the first staircase I come across, taking the steps two at a time in order to reach the top faster. When I finally arrive, there is a circular room with a door. And both women who I sent to guard my bride are standing on either side of the door.

They bow simultaneously.

“King Karo,” Anja murmurs.

“She is inside?” I ask. They dip their chins in a nod but do not speak. “You are dismissed until further notice.”

I watch as Ilta’s lips twitch into a smile as she takes half of a step toward me. “Yes, Your Highness,” she exhales.

The women move past me wordlessly as I take another step toward the door, then another. Reaching for the handle, I push it open and make my way into the space. I see her standing with her back to me as I close the door.

Her hair is long down her back, stopping well below her hips. I don’t recall it being so long when she was in my bed. Her focus is on the landscape in front of her. Her body curves just the way I prefer. I wonder if this could truly work? If she could be more than the woman who births my heir and spare. Perhaps there could be more.

“My bride,” I murmur.

“Do you even know my name?” she asks.

Her question catches me off guard. I’m not sure I have an answer for that. I should know her name, but I haven’t thought about that. Only the name of my wife who disappeared. I know she told me her name once, but it was not something I cared much about at the time. She has been nothing except a nuisance.

Except she isn’t that.

The goddess has made it very clear that she is my fated, that she is the one I’m meant to be with. The one who will

save this country. And with her fellow women from her country, she will defeat the entirety of the underworld.

“Tell me about yourself.”

She lets out a laugh, though she doesn't seem to be amused. Instead, she turns around, her eyes finding mine, and my breath is stolen by the hurt, fear, and sadness she shows me behind her beautiful green orbs.

“My name is Helmi,” she exhales. “And I want to go home.”

Shaking my head once, I place my hands on my hips and stare directly at her. Tears fill her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks at my gaze.

“This is your home.”

Chapter Eight

HELMI

THIS MAN IN FRONT OF ME, HIS EYES SEARCHING MY OWN. HE is beautiful still. I don't know if I will ever get over his looks. I can't stay here because I have a feeling that I'll be completely brain-dead, just staring at how handsome he is and letting him completely steamroll me in every way possible.

His hair is curled, his eyes are focused, and his smile... is too much. *He's too much.* I stay in my spot, my feet frozen and unable to move as I watch him and wait. I don't know why he's here. My knees are trembling as the thoughts spin around in my head, my imagination going wild.

"This is not my home," I state. He snorts, but I don't let him say anything else. Instead, I continue. "This was not my choice. I was taken from my bed, kidnapped, stolen from my family, and now I'm here with someone who locked me away in a prison."

"A prison?" he asks.

That is what he chooses to focus on. I almost roll my eyes at him but decide against it. I cross my arms over my chest, pressing my lips together, rolling them a few times as I stare at him. I'm not going to respond to his question. I don't think he really wants me to, anyway.

Instead, I wait.

“You think of this as a prison?” he asks, lifting his hand and waving it around once before placing it back on his hip. “This tower has housed every single queen in my country. This is where they were kept, protected, and raised until it was time for them to marry their kings.”

“And this is supposed to impress me?” I snap. “That you imprisoned the women you were going to marry? I don’t think so.”

Before I can say anything else, before I can react, this man charges me. I don’t even have enough reaction time to back away. His hand lifts and is wrapped around the front of my throat and catches me completely off guard. Sucking in a breath, I stare up at him, my lips parted and my body frozen in shock.

“You are my bride. Mine. You are protected here, which is why I sent you here, to keep you safe. You are home. You are the queen.”

Before I can try to think of something to say, he leans forward and slams his lips against my own. My body freezes, trembling in his grasp. His other hand wraps around my waist, pulling my body against his before he lifts his head.

“My Queen,” he rasps.

I don’t know what’s changed from the last time he glanced at me in disgust, unable to even look me in the eye. I don’t know what the difference is now, and I’m not sure I want to know. I just want to go home.

“Why?” I exhale. “Why?”

His lips twitch into a small smile. His voice is soft and almost sweet as he rumbles his next words. “Because you are my destiny.”

“I don’t want to be,” I whisper. “I miss my family, my home, my bed.”

He leans forward slightly, his mouth brushing mine. “I am your family. Maapallo is your home. And my bed is yours.”

His tongue slips inside of my mouth and swirls. I've never been kissed before, not like this. My knees buckle, but his arm tightens around my waist. Then, as quickly as he kisses me, he pulls his head back, releases me, and takes a few steps backward.

“Gather your things. We must head back to the castle.”

I stumble backward, my back slamming against the wall. Reaching out, I grip the stone wall in an attempt to hold on and keep myself from falling to the hard floor. He is hot and cold. He turns from me, his back facing me.

I don't understand anything about him. I don't know if it is a man and woman thing, an “other world” thing, or just the fact that we are absolutely nothing alike, but I am completely lost as I stare at this man's back.

“We leave in moments. I expect to see you on the other side of the door straightaway.”

He walks out of the room, closing the door behind him as if I'm not standing against the wall in complete and total shock, waiting for him to do something. Surprised by what he's done and the way he's acted.

My head feels like it's spinning. I don't know who this man is, and right now, I feel like I know him even less than I did before. I thought I could guess at his actions. That he would come in here, try to rape me and be on his way.

But this man claiming me the way he has, saying I'm his wife, his woman, demanding I'm his destiny. I don't know how I feel about this, but I could have never guessed that this would happen. I thought I would be locked in this tower until the day I died. And as sad as part of that sounded, I was already resigned to it—now I'm a bit unnerved by the whole thing.

Me going with him, back to his home, this means he'll expect more from me... like sex.

Before I can think through what's happened in the last five minutes, the door flies open, and I watch as Anja and Ilta both

burst into the room. Thankfully, the guard who had been in here earlier is not behind them.

“We’re going back to the castle,” Ilta cries out.

Obviously, this is exciting to her.

I still haven’t moved. My back is pressed hard against the stone wall, my mouth unmoving, words stuck deep down in my throat as I stare at them. I don’t know what to say, what to do, how to even breathe.

The two women gather all my things, not that I have much. All I have is what they brought with me—some clothes. I have nothing personal, mainly because all I did was wake up in this place. It’s not like I was able to take any keepsakes with me.

Once they have the small trunk packed to the top with my dresses, they turn to me almost simultaneously, their eyes wide but not quite as wide as their smiles.

“Are you ready?” Anja asks. “You must not keep the king waiting.”

“Why not?” I ask, though my words come out slowly.

I feel like I’m floating in the air and watching all of this happen from the outside looking in. Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I take them in, my gaze flicking back and forth as I wait for one of them to answer me.

“Because he is the king,” Anja states.

I want to reply with something smart-assed, but I decide not to. I’m in their world, and apparently, I am not going to be leaving anytime soon. Instead of arguing with them, I simply dip my chin and take a step forward.

I’ll follow them, and him, until I won’t anymore. But I’m not going to be stupid. I can’t just take off in the middle of the night. I don’t know anything about this place. I need to devise a smart plan. I need to watch out for my own back, and then I need to figure out how to get home. I’m not going to live in this place until I die, worrying my family to death.

No way in hell.

KARO

MY HORSE HAS BEEN WATERED AND FED. HE HASN'T RESTED too long, but I have a feeling it will be a slow ride back home. The women appear, with the witches carrying two trunks between them. They set it down at my feet, then exhale heavy sighs.

Turning my head, I lift my hand and call for the stable hand. I watch as he hurries toward me, stopping directly beside me, his chest rising and falling with his panting breaths. Smirking, I clear my throat before I speak.

“We need a horse and cart. Do you have one available? I will ensure it is returned.”

He turns his head, looking behind him at the stables, then shifts his attention back to meet mine. “I have a cart and horse, yes.”

A few moments later, a different stableman brings the horse and cart. I watch as he loads the trunks then helps the women onto the front bench. “You know how to steer?” I ask as I catch Anja’s gaze.

Her lips tip up into a smirk. “What kind of *tietäjä* would I be if I could not steer a horse and cart? We will be behind you, King Karo.”

Her voice softens, and I wonder why she is being so agreeable. Then I follow her gaze and see that she’s watching my bride. Helmi. I’m not sure how she’s supposed to make me feel, but when I think of her name, it causes my chest to warm.

Perhaps it’s just because I’ve allowed myself to truly see her, to think of her, to accept her.

Clearing my throat, I move toward my own Clydesdale, stopping beside him as I turn my head and look over my shoulder at Helmi. She takes a step back from me, turning toward the cart. Letting out a hum, I watch as she turns her head, her green eyes finding mine.

I jerk my chin toward the saddle that is securely placed on the back of my steed and arch a brow, silently waiting for her to understand my words.

“I’ve never ridden a horse before,” she calls out softly.

Frowning, I stare at her, unsure that I have heard her correctly. This is not possible. It cannot be. Can it? How can a person have never ridden a horse before?

“Do you not travel in your world?” I ask.

Her lips twitch into a small smile, and her face relaxes slightly when it does. This woman, she is beautiful, and although she appears to be the exact twin of my original bride, she is nothing like her. I can also see many facial features that are slightly different. It doesn’t bother me at all. In fact, I think I prefer this version of my bride... she has a bit more spirit.

“We do, but horses are usually only ridden for sport. It’s not something I’ve ever experienced before. We have other ways of traveling.”

I can’t deny that I’m curious about the other ways of travel, but I do not wish to discuss it in this moment.

“Then come with me, bride, and ride your first horse. I will control the beast.”

She makes her way toward me slowly but steadily, and I ignore the way the witches watch us. They are taking in this entire scene and, without a doubt, playing it out in their minds with whatever they think will happen. I believe they are loving this moment and watching it happen before their eyes.

Once Helmi is in front of me, I waste not a moment. Wrapping my hands around her waist, I pick her up and set her down on the back of the Clydesdale. I climb onto the back of the beast behind her and wrap my arm around her waist as I tug her back slightly so she is nestled between my thighs.

“I don’t know your name,” she whispers.

Leaning forward, I grab hold of the reins, my mouth touching the side of her neck, and I wish we had started differently together. “To the world, I am the king of

Maapallo,” I murmur, my lips on her skin, tasting her sweetness. “To you, I am simply Karo.”

“Karo,” she exhales.

“Yes, My Queen. That is my name. It is who I am, your husband and your destiny.”

I’m not sure how any of this will work out. She may not be the woman I spend my life with. Meri might come back here after the underworld is defeated, but in this moment, I need to have this marriage become a real one.

I need to woo her and tame her all at the same time while also allowing her to be her wild self because I truly enjoy that about her. It is a conundrum that I’m unsure I will be able to facilitate. Pressing my lips together, I ride away from the tower.

“Your brides are always locked in the tower?” she asks.

“They are,” I confess.

“Even the one who was my twin?”

I hum, unsure how to answer that exactly. “It’s true,” I state.

“But you were with her, married her, and loved her?”

I almost laugh at the word *love*.

What is love?

I’m not sure what the word even means. No king has loved their queen instantly. Perhaps some have grown into love, but most have been in tolerable relationships for the good of the country. I assuredly did not love Meri after one evening together.

“I married her, as is my duty to do such a thing. I bed her, as is also my duty. But there was no love, at least not yet. Respect, yes. Love, no.”

Saying those words, I’m unsure of how she will accept them, but she doesn’t speak immediately. Instead, she lets out a sigh and turns her head to the side. I watch her, allowing her to feel as she wishes.

It is not my duty to force her to feel any such way. She will bed me, as is her duty. She will fight the underworld, as is also her duty. But she does not need to love or even like me in the process.

Many queens have not.

Chapter Nine

HELMI

I'M NOT SURE HOW LONG I SPEND LOST INSIDE OF MY OWN head as we ride toward the castle. But as I see that we're approaching the beautiful building, I decide to ask this man a question. This man who I'm supposed to be married to, this man who did not love Meri and probably will not love me, as I'm just a duty...

A job to him.

"Do you think you could love me?" I ask.

He doesn't speak immediately. I hear him breathe behind me. Then his hand, which is still wrapped around my waist, slides up to the center of my chest, and then his fingers curl around the front of my throat as he murmurs against the side of my ear.

"Love matters not, Queen. Respect. That is what truly means something in this world."

He's right.

Respect.

I turn my head to look behind me. He doesn't release my throat, but he isn't squeezing me tightly. I have plenty of leeway. "Do you respect her, me? Anyone?"

He doesn't answer. He tugs on the reins of the horse, stopping him before we reach the outlying town that sits

outside the castle.

“See those huts?” he asks, his lips pressed against the shell of my ear as he speaks. I don’t answer him verbally, instead jerking my chin in a singular nod. “Those are just a few of my subjects. I respect them. I live for them. I serve them.”

“And your wife, even if she is just your fake wife?”

He hums, his teeth nipping my earlobe. “You are not my fake wife. If you wish to have a ceremony, we can have one.”

“Karo?” I call out softly.

He doesn’t speak. Instead, he waits for me to say whatever it is I have to say. I have plenty to say, but this isn’t the place or the moment. I sink my teeth into the corner of my bottom lip and wait, unsure of what to say... what to do.

“My bride?”

“You’ll want to have sex, then?” He chuckles but does not speak. “I’ve never done that, and I always imagined it would be with someone I loved who would love me back.”

“This isn’t the world you were born into, bride. You’re in a new world with different standards and rules. If we do not create life, the curse will amplify.”

Silence surrounds us as the horse begins to move closer and closer toward the city. “I need love,” I confess.

His lips move from my ear, his hand falls from my throat, then I feel his mouth at the side of my neck. He sucks gently, goose bumps breaking out over my skin before he whispers against my throat.

“Love means nothing, Helmi. You have everything else you could ever need. Protection, respect, power, and me.”

Lifting my hand, I wrap my fingers around the back of his neck to keep his mouth in place. Closing my eyes, I lean back slightly, enjoying his body close to mine, his lips on my sensitive skin.

“I want everything,” I breathe.

He hums, the vibrations causing another shiver to slide down my spine. “You have it all, Helmi. Everything.”

“Your faithfulness?”

Silence.

Deafening silence.

Then he speaks. “That is not discussed. Ever.”

“It may not have been, but it will be with me,” I murmur.

We approach the village, and he lifts his head from my throat. “We shall see, bride.”

That is all I get. Without another word, his arm moves to my waist, wrapping around me and keeping me still in the saddle. The people begin to walk out of their small wooden and thatch-roofed homes.

I hear them cheer before I shift my attention to them. They are waving and shouting at us, huge smiles showing on their faces.

So, I decide to do what I’ve seen in a million parades. Lifting my hand, I cup it slightly and wave to the people. This is the weirdest and most surreal situation I think I’ve ever been in, aside from waking up in a strange man’s bed in a strange world.

So I guess this moment maybe isn’t as surreal as waking up with this man, being told I’m in a new world, then being locked in a tower for weeks. But let’s just say this whole experience is beyond insane, and if I ever make it back home, I won’t be able to tell anyone about it because not a single person would believe me anyway.

The horse slowly makes its way toward the castle beyond the town, and I find myself wondering what is going to happen once we reach that place. It’s so beautiful to look at from the outside, and the landscape is exquisite to watch from the inside, but the actual inner workings of the place, I’m not so sure about.

Will I be locked in a room, a different version of the tower that I was once in? Will I be forced to have sex with this man

who claims he is my husband? Will I have any type of freedom at all?

It's clear that Karo will not be helping me find my way home, so that is something I'll have to do on the down-low. I'm not sure if there is anyone here at all whom I can trust to help me with that, though.

It has become very clear that while Anja and Ilta are on my side and willing to help me, as long as it is good for their kind, country, and people, they won't help me leave this place.

"This is your home, Helmi. These are your people. This is your new life. Whatever you had before, it is now over. This is where you belong," Karo murmurs against the shell of my ear.

His arm tightens around my waist, and I flick my gaze down. Taking in his forearm, I stare at the muscles, the bulging veins, the tanned skin. He's even got golden hair on his arms, and the way the sun hits them, it's almost as if they are made of glitter.

I can't stop staring at him. I've never been so entranced and enthralled by a man in my entire life. This man. Everything about him makes me nervous, excited, and tingly. It's the oddest sensation. Maybe he, Anja, and Ilta are right. Maybe this is my destiny after all.

KARO

MY BROTHER AND MY PERSONAL GUARD STAND IN THE courtyard as we approach the castle. I can tell that Runo is unhappy with me. After disappearing for weeks, he is likely going to attempt to scold me. It will not work, as I do not care. His arms are crossed over his chest, and his eyes are narrowed until he realizes Helmi is on the front of my saddle.

Once we are in the courtyard, I tug on the reins to stop the horse, then climb off him, jumping onto the ground. Reaching up, I wrap my hands around Helmi's waist and gently pluck her from the horse.

The women are coming up behind us. I can hear the wheels of the cart moving against the stone ground, crunching the small rocks that have broken from their stones. Runo doesn't look past me to take them in, though. His focus is on me and solely on me.

“Runo, this is my bride, Helmi,” I murmur. “Helmi, this is my brother, your new brother, Runo.”

Runo's gaze flicks to Helmi, and I watch as they stare at one another for a long moment. Then he takes a step forward and holds out his hand for her. She lifts hers, slipping her palm into his, and I watch as he bows slightly and touches his lips to the backs of her fingers.

“It is a pleasure, Queen,” he murmurs.

Though there is a bite to his tone, I am fully aware that it is intended for me. As the horse and cart approach with the witches, I take a step to the side, my gaze finding my personal attendant. He dips his chin, understanding my need for his attention, and hurries up to me.

“Your Highness,” Timo rasps, slowly lifting his gaze to meet my own. He is also unnerved, but not because he's angry. Likely, it is because Timo was worried. He's always been at my side, no matter the mission and I was gone for much longer than I previously intended.

“Gather a few maids to assist the queen. She is to be taken to her quarters, a bath drawn, some food, and drink brought to her and her women.”

His eyes widen, his gaze flicking behind me to Helmi, then back to mine. “Does this mean the queen will take up permanent residency in the castle?”

I would tell him to mind his own business, but this is very much *his* business. He is my personal attendant, but it is also his duty to assist the queen in having her own people. And since I've already sent away every single person who had previous contact with my first bride, Meri, he will have his work cut out for him.

“*Joo*,” I hum as confirmation. “The queen will reside in the castle until further notice.” Timo dips his chin, turns, and walks away in a hurry to do as I’ve ordered.

Shifting my attention to Helmi, I clear my throat. “I must speak with my brother. You and the women can rest and refresh until we dine this eve.”

Helmi’s eyes widen. She clears her throat but otherwise doesn’t speak. Dipping her chin, she shifts her gaze to her feet. Reaching out, I extend my fingers and touch the underside of her chin, tipping her head back until her gaze meets mine.

“I will see you for dinner, my bride,” I murmur.

As her eyes search mine, she doesn’t speak. She doesn’t even blink. I’m not sure what she’s thinking. I’m not sure it even matters. She is my queen, my bride, and she will be the one to save my people. The goddess already declared this. So what she is thinking truly matters not. However, I do not wish her to be miserable, either. We still must make heirs together and live a life beside one another.

“I will see you for our dinner. Take this afternoon to refresh and relax.”

Her tongue peeks out, sliding across her bottom lip before she lets out a sigh. “Okay, Karo.”

Leaning closer to her, I touch my lips to the corner of her mouth before I take a step backward, releasing my grasp on her. Before either of us can say anything else, we are surrounded by women.

They all *oooh* and *ah*, moving closer to the queen, then they practically sweep her into their arms and whisk her away. The two witches follow closely behind, and I watch as a couple of men gather the trunks as well. She will be taken care of, and it will give me the time I need to discuss what’s happened and what’s changed with Runo.

Shifting my attention to my brother, I smirk. “Shall we?”

“I think we shall, as it appears much has changed since you rode off several weeks ago.”

I choose to ignore his words. I had needed the time to think, to contemplate my decisions. Although, in the end, it was unnecessary, as the gods made the choice for me. It seems when it comes to being the king and ruling, they tend to do that.

We make our way into the castle and toward my private quarters. I wish this to be kept between us, and in my private rooms, we will be left completely alone. Moving through the castle, I can tell the air has shifted. There is a charge that wasn't here before I left.

There is something afoot.

I'm unsure of what it could be, but I will find out... immediately.

Locking all the secret passageways in my room, I ensure we are truly alone before I turn to Runo. He's sitting at the small table and chairs, two glasses filled with drink and his eyes focused on me and only me.

"Do tell what's happened, brother," he murmurs. "What kept you from us?"

Clearing my throat, I decide to tell him a bit, just enough to keep him from questioning details. "I spent several weeks considering the future. But before I could make my own decision, Goddess Ilmater came to me."

The coolness that Runo has about him relaxing in that chair immediately vanishes. He sits up a little straighter, leaning across the table as I sink down across from him. Lifting my lips into a small smile, I shrug my shoulder as if this is nothing, no big deal.

"She came to me. She said exactly what the *noita*, Ilta, had been claiming this whole time. The girl is from another world, brought here to be my destiny. She is to fight the underworld with two others who have come from her world."

"Just as the king of Sgaldachadh claimed."

His voice is full of awe, and I feel the exact same way, *full of awe* that this is reality. Never would I have guessed that this would be happening in my lifetime. Women brought from

another world, replacing destined brides and fighting the underworld for peace and tranquility.

The end of the curse on this world is right before me. My bride will end this. She is a warrior queen.

Runo lifts his cup, and I do the same. “To your bride, Helmi, who will save our world. Creator of life, savior of life, and warrior.”

“To Helmi,” I agree, clinking my cup against his. Then, together, we take a long pull and let out a bellowing round of laughter.

Is this freedom? Is this sensation what it feels like?

I think I rather enjoy this.

Chapter Ten

HELMI

I'M NOT SURE WHERE I'M BEING TAKEN, BUT I GO ALONG WITH the flow mainly because Karo told me to. I'm a shy and quiet person, but I feel different here. It's almost as if I'm a bit more brazen than I naturally am. Like it's in the water or the air or something.

Once I'm taken into a room, I look around and realize it's the same room I woke up in when I arrived here. Except it somehow feels different. Maybe it's me who's different, though. I'm still the scared woman I was, but I'm a little braver now.

I'm left alone with Anja and Ilta for a moment, their eyes widening as they stare at me. Turning to face them, I suck in a deep breath. "What happens now?" I ask.

Anja's lips curl into a smile before she dips her chin and takes half of a step toward me. I wait, watching her, wondering what she's going to say because she is behaving like this is some big secret.

"The tub will be brought into the bathing room, along with some food. Then, the garments will be chosen by the maids. After they've bathed you and you've eaten something and relaxed a bit, it will be time to dine with your husband."

My brows snap together at one word. *Garments*. So far, my clothes have been a few simple pieces that were gathered

from somewhere. I didn't ask, and I honestly didn't want to know, but this, Anja makes it sound like there is a closet full of clothes somewhere. And I'm not sure why, but that bothers me.

"What garments?" I ask.

"Your garments, the queen's," she announces.

The queen's garments. "Do you mean... *hers*?" I ask.

"Meri's. Yours, yes."

A shiver of disgust rolls through me. I don't know why, but that bothers me. I know that Meri isn't his destined bride or anything, and I'm not even sure that's what I want to be. But the jealous streak that rolls through me at the thought of wearing her clothes, of her in his bed, of him actually marrying her and being with her is hard to control.

All of it makes me want to scream and rage.

It shouldn't. I've never been a jealous or envious person before, and I don't feel any kind of way toward Karo, but it bothers me.

"I don't want her clothes," I whisper to myself, though I must say it louder than I thought because both Anja and Ilta hear me.

Ilta takes a step toward me just as the door to the room opens. All three of us snap our necks and look at the boys who carry the large basin tub into the room. They don't pay any attention to us. They move through the bathing room, place the tub down, then they leave again.

"They'll be back soon with buckets to fill the tub," Anja announces.

"Meri did not wear these items, Helmi. These were pieces that were commissioned and made for her, but they were not her personal pieces. They were specifically made for the queen of Maapallo. You are the queen. Therefore, they are yours."

That doesn't make me feel any better, even though I know it should. Instead of arguing about it or coming off as a spoiled

brat, I give them a smile and dip my chin once as I bite the inside of my lip.

Before I can say something that would make me look bad and rude, the door opens again, and not only do the four boys reappear, this time with buckets full of water but there are also four women who follow behind them. All of them carry layers of material stacked in their arms.

The women move around the room, effectively ignoring me, and I'm okay with that. I would rather not be seen or heard at this point. I am so nervous about what is going to happen after this dinner, what Karo is going to expect from me, and knowing exactly what it will be, I want to curl into a ball and disappear.

When the boys finish filling the tub and hurry out of the room to leave us alone, the women finish their duties with the layers of fabric before they turn to face me. Every single one of them dips in a slight curtsy before straightening. Then, one of them takes a step toward me, lifting her gaze to meet my own.

"It is time for your bath, Your Highness, before the water goes cold."

She turns her back to me, then begins to head toward the bathing room. I follow, unsure of what to do or what to expect. I can hear Ilta and Anja behind me, and when I step into the bathing room, I gasp when the maids start tugging on my clothes.

In moments, I'm naked, then practically pushed into the water. Lifting one leg, then the other, I sink down into the warm water with a hiss. The women begin to bathe me, pouring water on my head and lathering soap. I am caught completely off guard. In the tower, when I was locked away, I bathed myself.

This is all new and different. I'm not sure if I like it. No, I take that back. I'm sure I don't. There is zero privacy. Not a single ounce. I let them do their thing, figuring that fighting this would result in more drama than it's worth.

When they're finished, Anja dismisses them, and I let out a sigh of relief. I've been with Anja and Ilta so much that I am comfortable around them, but the four extra humans were making me a bit nervous.

"We will dress the queen," Ilta states.

The women leave, and I turn my head, wrapping the fluffy white towel around my body and giving them a smile. "Thank you," I whisper. "That was a lot."

"Dismissing them wasn't just about you," Anja states. "We need to talk to you."

Dread fills me at the seriousness in her tone. Ilta turns and walks into the bedroom. I follow and watch as she riffles through a drawer. She turns to me with some fabric in her hands, then moves toward me, holding it up.

"These are undergarments and a dressing gown. We'll get you all dressed for dinner when it's closer. No sense in being uncomfortable when it's just us," Ilta says with a warm smile.

A few moments later, I'm dressed, and the three of us are sitting around what I would call a rustic charcuterie. Anja levels me with her gaze and begins to talk to me about what she's had on her mind... seemingly for a while.

KARO

"WHAT HAPPENS NOW?" RUNO ASKS.

My lips twitch into a smirk as I bring my cup to my lips and suck down a gulp. "Now, we go to dine."

Runo rolls his eyes to the ceiling, shaking his head a couple of times, then his gaze finds mine again and holds it for a moment. "The future, Karo. What happens next?"

"I do not know. It is up to the gods. I still must create heirs and live our lives. We cannot wait for the underworld to come to us and worry about the outcome. It may never happen, though I cannot see that. I truthfully believe that it will be here when we all least expect it."

Runo chuckles. “Then we should always expect it.”

“We shall,” I murmur as I stand. “In the meantime, I will work on creating an heir, and you will marry your young bride and start your lives. When it is time to fight, we will be ready, willing, and able. But first, we eat.”

Together, my brother and I make our way to the dining room. The table is loaded with food, although there are no women waiting for us to arrive. Frowning, I glance down the hallway to see if they’re headed in our direction, but nobody is coming.

“Shall I gather the women?” Timo calls out.

“They will arrive when they are ready,” I grunt.

Tugging my chair back, I sink down in the leather seat and pour myself another drink. Runo does the same beside me. I am unsure of when they will arrive and why they’re late, but it matters not.

This eve, we will consummate our marriage, our relationship. Perhaps I should be thinking of Meri, but I cannot. She was not my destined match from the gods. I hope she has found her happiness where she is supposed to be, but I cannot be concerned with her, not any longer.

Runo and I finish a cup of alcohol and we are pouring another when the women appear. Both of us stand. Dipping my chin, I keep my eyes on my bride as she moves toward me. The witches find their chairs and stand, waiting to sit until Helmi and I do first.

She turns to me slightly. I look at her, give her a smile, and reach for her hand. Lifting it toward my face, I dip my chin and touch my lips to the backs of her fingers. “Good evening, my bride.”

She lets out a sigh, though she doesn’t speak. Releasing her hand, I straighten my back and continue to smile, then dip my chin toward her chair. “Shall we dine?” I ask.

“Yes, please,” she exhales, finally speaking.

Simultaneously, we sink down on the leather cushions, and the others at the table follow. “Pour yourselves a cup. I would like to toast this eve,” I call out.

I watch as everyone pours themselves a cup, Helmi included, and I lift mine as I wait for them to do the same. Once all our cups are lifted, I make a toast.

“To my true bride. The gods have brought us together for a purpose. We must honor them but also honor one another. I cannot wait to learn more about you and to grow our family.”

“To Helmi,” Runo calls out.

The women follow suit, and we touch our cups to one another’s before bringing them to our lips and sucking the contents down. My eyes do not leave hers. I watch her green orbs as she takes a drink from the cup, our gazes never losing contact.

“To my bride,” I rasp.

She sets the cup down, a small smile playing on her lips. “To my husband,” she exhales.

I give her a wink, and we begin to dine. Our conversation halts as the food is being passed around, and then voices rise in discussion by everyone who surrounds us. I watch her, wondering what has changed because it is clear to me that something inside of her is indeed different.

Noting that change, that shift, it doesn’t disappear as she begins to pick at her food. Moving closer to her, I reach out and touch her cheek with the back of my finger. Helmi turns to me slightly, her green eyes focusing on mine.

“Tell me what moves through your mind,” I gently demand.

Her eyes round before she shifts in her seat slightly. “I’ve been told what’s expected of me tonight, and I’m nervous,” she admits.

It’s my turn for my eyes to widen and round at her confession. Clearing my throat, I recall what was said to me

when she arrived here. When I realized that she wasn't Meri. She is untouched.

"I will endeavor to give you pleasure before the undoubted pain."

"I just..." Her words trail off as she sucks in a deep breath, then lets it out slowly. "I thought I would be in love. I was saving myself."

Gliding my hand up, I wrap my fingers around the side of her neck, flexing them gently as I continue to stare directly into her beautiful green gaze. "You saved yourself for your husband," I say. "That is who I am."

"My husband who loves me. I saved myself for a husband who loves me."

We stare at one another, and I wish I could give her that. *Love*. I do not understand it, though. My life has been duty, honor, and war. Love has not been at the forefront of my lessons, schooling, or community. I love my blood brother, Runo, and my brothers in war. But I do not believe it's the same as what she is inferring here.

"I will endeavor to give you what you deserve, Helmi."

It is the only vow I can make, and thankfully, her body relaxes and she accepts my words, partially because she wishes them to be true, so she would believe anything I said as long as it was what she wanted to hear.

"I hope this is the right decision," she exhales.

"The gods have willed it, Helmi. It is the right thing to do."

Releasing her, I shift back to my plate and begin to eat. I can feel Runo watching me, but when I flick my attention to him, he's got his head bowed and is working on a second helping of meat.

I lift my head for my attention to span the room. Helmi is speaking with the *noita*, their heads tipped together as they are lost in conversation. But the *tietäjä* is watching me, her head tilted to the side, her gaze searching mine.

Leaning back, I lift my cup toward her. She lifts hers in my direction, and together we drink. When she stands and slips out of the room, I decide to follow her. There is something she wishes to tell me alone, and I am going to hear her out.

Chapter Eleven

HELMI

MY HEART SLAMS AGAINST MY CHEST AS I WATCH ILTA AND Karo slip away. I'm not sure where they're going, and instant jealousy fills my body. But I tamp it down, forcing it to vanish, because I know she is going to talk to him about my brother. That must be what she's taking him away to do.

I spoke with Ilta and Anja earlier, begging them to bring my brother here. I can live away from some people in my world. I don't want to live without my parents, but I think I can. However, I cannot live without Nilo.

As much as he annoys the shit out of me, he is also part of my heart. We are connected in a way that is more than just simply siblings. We've always been close. I know when he's hurting, and he knows when I'm scared. It's almost as if we were twins, but we aren't—it's the only way I can explain it.

Ignoring the pang of jealousy at watching Ilta and Karo disappear together, I turn back to my plate and begin to pick at the food there. It's not that I don't like the food. It's that I'm nervous, upset, jealous, and a cluster of emotions that I don't think I could even pinpoint right now. This entire thing, me being here at all, is really confusing for me.

“Are you well, Queen?” a deep voice asks.

I lift my head, and my eyes shift upward and focus on the man sitting across from me. My brother-in-law. I know even

less about Runo than I do Karo, and that's saying something because I know pretty much nothing about Karo.

Watching him for a moment, I wonder what he's thinking about all of this. He doesn't seem to be concerned about much. He smiles easily. Even now, he's wearing a cocksure grin as he observes me and waits for my answer.

"Helmi. Please call me Helmi," I say.

He smirks. "Good," he murmurs. "Family."

My lips curve up into a smile. "We are that, aren't we?" I ask. "Family?"

He hums, his gaze searching mine. "Family," he says with a nod. "That is what we are. Now, are you well?" he asks again.

Thinking about his words, I know I can't tell him the truth. I can't tell this man, this stranger, that I'm scared to death about losing my virginity tonight. That I'm in a world I don't understand. I'm destined to be this guy's woman and save the world, none of which I comprehend.

This man I do not love and who does not love me back. This man I'm going to be forced to give my virginity to. This man I'm married to, but I'm not really married to because I wasn't here when the vows were spoken. My twin was.

It's so confusing and upsetting. The whole thing makes me want to sit in the corner and cry at this point. And that doesn't even include the fact it's all strange and I miss my family.

But I cannot tell Runo any of this.

So, instead of spilling all my thoughts, fears, and hopes on this man, I shake my head once and smile. This is not his business. They're not his worries. They are mine, and the emotional things are just that—*emotions*. They don't matter. It's become very clear that Karo, Anja, and Ilta are only concerned with the underworld, the gods, and destiny.

"I am well," I reply, my smile wide and fake.

So fake.

What feels like hours later, Ilta and Karo return. Though to be fair, it probably hasn't been hours since everyone else is still eating and drinking around the table. It just feels that way.

My eyes find Ilta's, my heart hopeful, but when she shakes her head once, her gaze shifting to her feet, I know the answer. Neither of them says a single word to me, but it is clear that what I want isn't going to happen... at least not yet.

Because even though he has told Ilta no, that doesn't mean he'll tell me no. One day, I will talk him into allowing Nilo to come here. Eventually, one day, Karo will love me, and he will wish to make me happy, and that is the only thing that will do it.

Nilo being here, a piece of home, will make me happy—content. My Nilo, being with me. Even if we can't have our parents, we will have one another, and I think I could live in this strange place forever as long as he was here, too. He has always been and will always be my protector, my comfort, half of my soul.

Karo reaches for the pitcher of alcohol, pouring himself another cup. I don't know if it's wine or beer. I'm not an expert or anything, but it seems almost as if it's a mix of both by the taste of it. He lifts his cup to his lips, and I watch as he takes a long drink. Then, his gaze flicks to meet mine, and he places his cup down on the table.

We stare at one another for a long moment, neither of us speaking, then he stands beside me. With one hand holding the drink, his other palm faces up, and he waits. My tongue peeks out, sliding across my bottom lip as I weigh this moment.

Taking his hand means that I'm going to agree to go to bed with him. I'm going to agree to this marriage, him taking my virginity... and that this, all of this, is my purpose. There will be no denying it after this happens.

This moment is my silently signed contract.

Signed. Sealed. Delivered.

As much as I want to continue to hesitate, maybe ask for a few more weeks, I know I can't. This is a do-or-die moment,

so I need to make a decision. Glancing over my shoulder, I flick my gaze between Anja and Ilta, but they offer me nothing except knowing smiles.

Exhaling a breath, I turn back to face Karo, tipping my head back slightly as my gaze travels up to his, and I lift my hand. Placing my fingers in his open palm, I stand. The room falls silent, and I can't stop the heat from rising to my cheeks as embarrassment fills me.

“Let us take our leave, Helmi.”

They know where we're going to go and what we're going to do. I want to crawl into a hole right now and hide away from them all. If Karo notices my embarrassment or feels any shame of his own, he shows me nothing.

His fingers grip mine, and he gently tugs me as he turns and begins to walk out of the dining room. I follow behind him, one foot after the other, step by step until we reach the bottom of the staircase.

Karo takes one step, then another, and turns his head, looking over his shoulder at me with a smile. When he speaks, his voice is an even mixture of gruff and gentle at the same time. I don't know how he does it... but I feel safe with him.

KARO

I THINK ABOUT TAKING HELMI BACK UP TO HER ROOM INSTEAD of my own quarters, but I decide against it. That was where she woke up in my arms after what I thought was our wedding night, in a strange world next to a man she had never met before.

So, perhaps a change of scenery is exactly what we need. Making my way down the hallway, I dip my chin at Timo as I reach for the door. “You are dismissed,” I murmur in his direction.

Timo dips his chin in a single nod, then takes a step forward and moves past us. He disappears to places unknown. It matters not what he does in his free time. It is his to do as he

pleases. Reaching for the handle, I push the door open and slip inside, my bride following close behind me.

Once we're in the quarters, I release my grasp on her hand and close the door behind her. Silently, she continues farther into the space. Though I can't see her face, I imagine she is taking it in. It is not just a simple room, bathing room, a small sitting area, and bed like her space.

This is much more opulent.

I am the king of Maapallo, and this is my space to hold official meetings. Private ones, as well. Whatever needs to be done. There will be times when I will dine in here, too. But also, there is more than enough room for my queen if I should wish to have her reside with me here.

There are no rules that state she must be separate from me. It is my preference, and since we don't know one another yet, it seemed like the best arrangement. Now, I'm not so sure. As I watch her walk around the chamber, I realize she looks very good in my space.

I may wish to keep her here for more than just an evening.

Helmi moves toward the window and lifts her hand, wrapping her fingers around the side as she peers out at the ocean. The view from her chamber is of the landscape, the rolling hills and the flowers. Mine is of the sea.

"What do you think?" I ask.

She doesn't turn to look back at me. Instead, she stays where she is. "It's beautiful. I don't think I've ever seen a view quite like this."

Moving toward her, I stop when I'm directly behind her and place my palm in the center of her back. "I don't believe I have either, My Queen."

"But you have," she whispers.

I hum, sliding my hand up her spine, wrapping my fingers around the back of her neck, and squeezing her there before I let my hand drop down to my side. Slowly, she turns around, her eyes lifting to meet mine.

“I haven’t, Helmi,” I murmur, my gaze holding hers. “I am seeing this for the first time.”

“You don’t have to sweet-talk me,” she whispers.

My lips twitch into a small smile. “I do not understand this word,” I say. “But I can guess. And although I know I do not need to give you honeyed words, the words are just the truth. Meri looked like you in many ways. However, she was not you.”

“No, she was not,” she whispers.

I lift my arm, my hand cupping her cheek as my gaze searches hers. “You are unique. There is no comparison because you are just you, Helmi. My bride, my queen, my future.”

“I am scared,” she exhales.

Leaning forward, I touch my lips to the corner of her mouth. “Do not be fearful. I will never intentionally hurt you.”

Her body trembles, and I slide my free arm around her waist, pulling her closer to my body. I’m sure she can feel my hard length against her stomach. Sliding my lips over hers, I cover her mouth with my own, slipping my tongue inside of her to taste my bride.

With a whimper, she lifts her hands between us, gripping my tunic tightly as her back bows. Breaking the kiss, I nibble gently on her bottom lip, my gaze searching hers. Her kiss sends a thrill of desire down my spine and tingles in my lower back.

The sensation is like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. My entire body feels as if it is on fire. A fire I quite enjoy. Lifting my head, I look down at her face, her eyes wide and my breathing labored as I stare at her, waiting for something to happen.

I don’t know what I’m waiting for because this is the moment. This is the time. This is the two of us and the beginning of our lives together—the future that is ours for the taking.

“Do not ever think that you are second. That you are not my chosen bride. That you are less than.” She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, her large green eyes staring directly at me. I’m unsure if she believes my words, but they are the truth.

Taking a step backward, I wrap my fingers around her wrist and gently tug her toward me. Then I take another step back, again tugging her toward me. And another. Until I reach the door to my bedchamber.

“What’s behind there?” she asks on an exhale.

Chuckling, I flex my fingers around her wrist as I tug the door open. “The bedchamber, wife.”

Her body stiffens, and I expect her to try to back away again, but she doesn’t. Instead, she straightens her spine, her shoulders squaring, and takes a step toward me, then another, until she passes me and walks into the room ahead of me.

Chapter Twelve

HELMI

I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S COME OVER ME, BUT I AM FEELING brave in the moment. Moving into the bedroom, I am taken aback at the side of the bed. It's at least twice as big as the one in my room. There are also four tall posts and fabric that hang down from it to conceal the people behind.

Turning my head, I look over my shoulder at Karo, who is watching me. I can't tell what he's thinking, but he's staring at me, his gaze tracking my every move. Reaching for the buttons of my dress, I pluck them, opening them before I slowly turn around to face him.

The dress gently falls to the floor around my feet, leaving me in just the undergarments that aren't much to write home about. It's a knee-length white chemise that is so sheer I know Karo can see right through it.

Pressing my lips together, I roll them a few times. My feet are unable to move. They're frozen to the floor, and while I know he's already seen me naked before, there is something different about this moment.

This isn't him simply seeing me naked in a moment of panic and shock. This is a moment that will lead to something, something I've never done before. Something I thought I would only do with a man who loved me...

“Helmi,” he murmurs, his voice rumbling as it bounces off the stone walls around us.

“Karo,” I exhale.

He takes a step toward me, then another. He lifts his hand, extending his finger, touching my temple, then it slides down the side of my cheek, my jawline, and stops at the center of my chin before it drops to his side.

Slowly, I lift my hand to the ties of my undergarment and tug at the strings. The gown slides off my shoulders, and I let out a shaky breath as it falls to the floor. It’s as if I’ve given some kind of green light. Karo rushes me. His hands grip my waist, and he picks me up before he walks us both backward and tosses me onto the bed.

I believe what he’s doing is called manhandling, and when I let out a squeal, I can’t help but laugh. I’ve read books and seen movies with a scene just like this, and I never thought it would happen to me.

Without another word, he climbs between my legs, his hips resting there, and I can feel him. Lifting my hands, I grip his biceps, my eyes wide and my mouth parted as I stare up at him.

His mouth touches mine in a hard, owning kiss, then moves down my throat, his lips touching and his tongue sliding over my skin. Then he makes his way to my breast, and I cry out as soon as his tongue touches my nipple.

Lifting my hand, I grip his hair, twisting the strands between my fingers as he devours my breasts. His tongue flicks my nipples, his teeth sinking into my flesh. I don’t have control of myself. My hips lift, and I whimper at the feel of his hard length against my center.

Closing my eyes, I sink my teeth into my bottom lip and just feel. The anxiety I felt moments ago vanishes as Karo’s lips touch and kiss all over my body. Combined with his tongue and teeth, it’s almost too much.

I feel as if my body is on fire. Everything is a little too much. Tugging on his hair, I try to make him lift his head to

cut a bit of the sensation, but it doesn't work. In fact, he moves even farther down my body.

Then.

He.

Is.

Right.

There.

Releasing his hair, I ball my hands into fists as I lift my hips in an effort to get closer to him. His tongue swirls my clit, sucking and then flicking it with his tongue over and over.

I've never done anything like this before. I felt like a loser for all these years because I didn't experiment with sex, but right now, I'm glad I waited.

I didn't know it could feel like this. It's like my entire body is electrified. His tongue works my clit, then I feel two fingers slide inside of me. Slamming my fists down beside my hips on the bed, I grip the sheets with my fingers and cry out.

It's too much.

So much.

Lifting my hips over and over, I pinch my eyes closed and allow my body to climb higher and higher toward the edge. I'm not sure what is going to happen when I go over, but there's nothing else I can do.

I can't stop it.

I can't control it.

My legs widen, they fall open, and I come. It's hard and fast. It rolls throughout my entire body, and when it hits me, I sit up and open my mouth, but no sound comes out. Karo's eyes open. He looks up at me through his lashes before he sucks on my clit one last time and shifts backward, away from my center.

He crawls up my body, his hips between my thighs again, and I've never wanted anything more than I want him inside of

me right now. I feel an emptiness that I know only he can fill. Even though that scares me half to death.

When the head of his length presses against my center, I suck in a deep breath, holding it as I stare into his eyes.

“I am going to make you mine now, wife.”

“Yes,” I exhale.

He shifts, thrusting inside of me with one move. I cry out, tears filling my eyes, but they don't fall. He stays buried deep inside of me, his eyes on mine. Slowly, he lowers his head, his mouth touching mine in a gentle kiss.

Eventually, my body relaxes, the pain ebbs, and Karo begins to move inside of me. His gaze never leaves mine. His jaw clenches, his teeth gnashing together as he watches me, unwavering.

Lifting my legs, I wrap them around his waist as I raise my hips to meet his. He lets out an exhaled breath, then he shifts his head forward, his lips right at my ear. I can smell him, feel him. I'm on sensory overload right now, and then he whispers words to me that I don't understand.

“En voisi elää ilman sinua.”

KARO

ROLLING ONTO MY SIDE, I ATTEMPT TO CATCH MY BREATH. I've never, not in my life, experienced a moment like this before. I've bedded many women in my time, but I have never felt this way. There is something about her. It's magical. It's obviously meant to be. Otherwise, it would not have felt that way.

Turning my head, I look at her. She gives me a small smile, though she doesn't say anything. She doesn't need to. Lifting my hand, I slide the backs of my fingers down her cheek, my gaze searching hers for a long, silent moment.

“Are you well, My Queen?” I ask.

Her lips turn up into a soft smile. “I am well, Karo.”

The way she says my name makes me want her even more than I already do, and I'm ready for a second go with her. Though I don't think she would be prepared. Her body no doubt desires rest from my invasion.

Gathering her in my arms, I pull her across the bed. She rests her head on my chest, her cheek pressing against my skin as she lets out a sigh. Grazing my fingers up and down her bare back, I close my eyes as I feel her soft body pressed against mine.

"What happens now?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

Sliding my hand up the center of her spine, I grip her hair, tangling my fingers in the strands before I gently tug her head back and look into her eyes. "Now," I murmur, "now is the time to live our lives."

"And the witches, they're going to stay here, too?" she asks.

I can't quite guess what the hell she's thinking by her tone. It's clear that she is asking for a reason, but I'm not sure if it's because she wants the women to leave or to stay.

"They'll stay, as they are the most powerful in the country, in different ways. Anja is a *tietäjä*, and Ilta is a *noita*."

"I don't understand," she confesses.

Keeping my firm grip on her hair, I continue to stare into her mesmerizing green eyes as I watch her. "A *noita* is a witch, something that is practiced but done in secret here. A *tietäjä* is a powerful healer."

"Are you saying that Anja has no powers?"

Shaking my head once, I lean forward and touch my lips to her forehead. "Ilta is the most powerful *noita* in the land if she can do what she did, spiriting you here. But she's told me that by doing that, she's depleted her magic."

I understand that Helmi wishes to bring her brother to this world. And I know the blow I've just given her affects her

deeply as I watch the disappointment and sadness instantly wash over her at the realization that Ilta cannot bring him here.

This is what she hopes for. This is what she wishes to happen, but it simply cannot. “There is no hope,” she whispers.

“There isn’t, I’m afraid. At least not anytime soon. The magic will come back to her, though I know not how long it will take. I see that she did not tell you any of this.”

“No,” Helmi exhales. “She did not. So, they’ll stay here because?” she asks again.

I hum, unsure of how I will answer exactly. I could tell her the full truth, that they are here to keep an eye on her. She is a stranger in a strange land. Though I do not think she would approve of that too awfully much. So, I do not say that.

Instead, I give her a small smile, shifting close to her and touching my lips to hers. “They are the only two people in this world aside from me and Runo who know who you are and from where you’ve come.”

“You’re keeping them here to be my friends and hold me in line with what’s expected of me,” she murmurs.

Rolling both of us over so that we’re on our sides facing one another, I tangle my legs with hers, my hand still buried in the soft tresses of her hair. My gaze focuses on hers. “I’m keeping them here so you are not lonely. If you wish to be friends with them, then you may, but more than anything, they will help you transition.”

Her brows snap together, and she stares at me for a moment, her gaze searching mine, before she lets out a sigh. I wait, wondering what she is going to say. Because it’s clear she has something on her mind aside from the disappointment at her brother not being able to come here anytime soon.

“I suppose that I’ve never been in a world quite like this before. I’ve never even met royalty, let alone been part of it. I’m sure I’ll have a million questions once things settle down a bit.”

Releasing my grasp on her hair, I shift my hand to her cheek, cupping her there as I stare into her pretty gaze. I can tell she is quite apprehensive, but I feel none of that any longer. Being inside of her body was as if a piece of me had been missing my entire life.

I know the gods made her for me, and I plan on keeping her beside me, always.

“All will be well, my bride.”

Chapter Thirteen

HELMI

“YOU’RE ANGRY WITH ME,” ILTA ANNOUNCES AFTER THE MEN have gone to do whatever it is they do during the day. I’m sitting rather uncomfortably on the hard chair at the table, trying to concentrate on eating the breakfast in front of me, but I can’t.

“You didn’t tell me,” I murmur.

There is a moment of silence, then she clears her throat. “You wanted me to talk to Karo, and I did.”

I snort, leaning back in the chair with a hiss. The warm bath I took late last night didn’t really ease the pain between my legs, but I’m sure that doing it this morning with Karo also didn’t help matters much.

He tried to tell me no. He tried to warn me that I would be in pain, but at the time, with his warm body pressed against mine, it seemed rather worth it. I’m not so sure right now that I made the correct choice in the matter.

“You didn’t tell me that it wasn’t even possible, though,” I state.

I’m irritated, and I wonder if this is even the truth. Did he lie to me? Did she lie to him? I know they think this whole thing with the gods is real, and they’ll do and say anything to keep me right where I am until whatever it is they’re waiting for comes to fruition.

“It is true, Helmi,” Anja says, speaking for the first time this morning. “Nobody knows how slowly her magic will take to return. She could wake up one day and be fully restored.”

Biting the inside of my cheek, I flick my attention back to her. “Did he say that you could bring him here when your magic returns?” I ask.

My heart skips a beat as it fills with hope, but when she shifts her attention to her lap, my hopes are dashed in the next breath.

“Not at this time,” she murmurs.

Not at this time.

Which means probably never, unless I can talk him into it... and don't be mistaken, I will talk him into it. Lifting my hands, I smile at the women, then let out a whoop before I speak.

“Well, it seems like I have a whole country here that I know nothing about, and you're supposed to be my guides. So, let's do something. I've been freaked out, spirited to another world and locked in a tower. I have a little freedom now, so show me around.”

Anja and Ilta's heads turn, and they face one another. I watch them, their eyes widening as they stare for a long moment, then they slowly turn to face me. They don't speak right away, but they do watch me, almost in awe.

As if they cannot understand why I would want to go on a little adventure. I open my mouth to ask them if everything is okay, but instead, they jump to their feet simultaneously. I am so confused that I snap my lips closed.

“We would love to show you around, Helmi...” Anja says. I can hear the *but* on the tip of her tongue and wait for her to say something else, but she doesn't. Instead, it's Ilta who speaks.

“Karo asked us to keep you inside, as it's your honeymoon.”

Honeymoon.

“Yes, honeymoon,” Ilta confirms. I must have accidentally said the word aloud, but really, honeymoon? “If you are seen out and about, people will worry that you are not taking your duty as the new queen seriously.”

Pressing my lips together, I roll them a few times before I tilt my head to the side and release my lips. “My duty?” I ask.

“Creating an heir,” Anja states, as if I should know this already and it’s too simple to even say aloud.

I stare at them, my lips now parted in awe. I mean, I’ve read history books about this kind of thing, and this is some seriously old-fashioned stuff here, but I don’t know. I didn’t think it was quite that way.

“Wait,” I call out.

Though my voice only carries as a whisper, even though I mean to say it louder, it’s as if it is stolen by the absolute shock of the situation. Then, it hits me like a tsunami. He didn’t use any protection. I’ve never been on anything. I could be pregnant right now, which means...

“Meri could be pregnant, too,” I whisper.

Silence.

Not a single word is spoken. The ache between my legs instantly becomes an annoyance, and I am filled with anger and jealousy. Sucking in a breath, I hold it as something else flashes through my mind.

“If Meri has his baby, does that mean that she was truly his destiny and this was all a cruel joke of some kind?” I ask.

The women don’t say a word. Instead, they shift their attention from me to one another, then back to me, never speaking a word. “I believe we need to discuss some things,” Anja mutters.

“I believe we do as well,” I state.

But they clearly do not wish to discuss anything with me because they turn their backs and begin to walk away. I start to follow them, but Ilta stops and faces me. Her gaze searches

mine, and she gives me a small smile, although it doesn't reach her eyes.

“There are some things that we need to discuss without your presence, Helmi. I do apologize, but it is the way of things,” she says, her voice soft, her tone gentle, as if I'm some kind of wild animal.

I open my mouth to ask her what she needs to discuss without me and why she thinks she can do that when, as if summoned by some magical being, Karo waltzes through the door. He stops just a few feet from me, glistening with sweat and slightly out of breath.

Instantly, I forget everything I'm upset about just at the sight of him. “Bride,” he grunts as his eyes find mine.

My thighs quake. They tremble as I try to keep myself upright. I don't have to try too hard because, as if he's drawn to me the way I am to him, Karo is in front of me, his arm around me, holding me to him. My chest is pressed against his, and I melt.

“Husband,” I exhale.

His lips twitch into a small smile. “I feel as if I've spent too many hours away from you. I've missed your presence. How are you feeling? Are you too sore?”

I'm not sure what to say. Moments ago, I was so sore that I wanted to cry with every single move I made. Even breathing was painful. But it's almost as if that was all a dream. Right now, I can't think of anything other than him inside of me.

“In the middle of the morning?” I ask on a whisper.

He lets out a low chuckle, then leans forward, his mouth touching mine. “It matters not what hour of the day it is, Helmi. Come and let me taste you.”

A shiver of desire rolls up my spine.

He wants to taste me... *Yes, please.*

KARO

THIS MORNING WAS NOT EXACTLY HOW I WISHED IT TO GO. A ride on my Clydesdale was much needed, but what met me at the edge of the cliff was not what I wished to see. A ship in the distance. Said ship shall arrive later in the day, just in time for the evening meal.

I knew who it was based on the flag they were flying. So did Runo. They must have flown home, packed, and then climbed onto a boat to come back here. Turning away from the cliffs, I went straight home, sweat collecting on my skin at the thought of what was to come.

Is this the sign that the underworld is on its way?

Now, I have my wife in my arms and feel a sense of sweet relief. What comes our way, even the underworld, we will fight it together. Although, I don't think she's ready for anything like that yet. She hasn't even walked out of the castle yet, let alone know how to fight beings from the netherworld.

Bending slightly, I pick Helmi up and carry her to our bedchamber. Internally, I've made the decision to move her into my chambers. There's no reason for us to be separated. I enjoy having her warmth beside me. I will have to instruct the maids to move her things over... but only after.

"Karo," she exhales as I lower her feet to the stone floor.

When she's stable, I take a step back and smirk. "Helmi," I murmur.

Extending my arm, I reach for the belt of her dress, tugging on it to bring her closer to me again. She tips her head back, her green eyes meeting mine. Her brows snap together and her lips part as if she is going to say something to me, but then she closes them and shakes her head a couple of times before she gives me a soft smile. Whatever her thoughts were, they are now gone.

Slowly, I undress her until she's wearing nothing save for her chemise. I can see every inch of her bare body beneath the light fabric, and my cock stands at attention with anticipation, but first, I must keep my promise and taste her.

"Sit on the edge of the bed, wife," I demand.

Helmi takes a step backward, then another one, until the backs of her legs hit the side of the bed, and then she stops. She doesn't sink down onto the mattress immediately but stays where she is as her eyes find mine.

"Lift your chemise and sit, Helmi," I order gently.

I hear her breath hitch at my words, then her shaky fingers reach down and slowly lift the gown up her long legs, then expose her sweet center as she sinks down onto the edge of the mattress.

"Lift your feet, wife. Place them on the side rail of the bed."

She does as I demand, lifting her feet and placing them on the side of the bed. Then, without my prompting, she spreads her legs and shows me her sweetness. Moving toward her, one step, then two, I don't sink to my knees immediately.

Instead, I reach forward, extending my index finger beneath her chin and tilt her head backward. Her head moves, but those green orbs stay looking downward. I do not speak. I do not move. I wait.

Slowly, her gaze lifts to meet mine, and her eyes remain there. I can see the fear, the worry, and the excitement behind those eyes of hers. "You are safe here, Helmi. I swear it."

She doesn't speak. Instead, she lifts her hand, wrapping her fingers around my wrist, and gently tugs my hand from her face, turning her head and touching her lips to the center of my palm.

With my other hand, I slip between her legs and gently slide my finger through the folds. I hear her hiss of breath and know she must be sore there.

Sinking to my knees, I remove my hand and take a moment to bury my face between her legs. Sliding my tongue through her center, I taste her fully. She whimpers, burying her hands in my hair, and she gently tugs on the strands.

She can tug and pull all she wants. I will not stop until I've tasted her sweet release on my tongue. Helmi widens her legs, spreading them farther as she attempts to get closer to me.

Lifting my gaze, I look up at her from beneath my lashes, my heart racing at the sight of her. Helmi's arms are straight, her hands I can feel in my hair, her head tipped backward slightly, and her back is bowed as she moves against my tongue.

She has completely and totally surrendered herself to me, and I've never seen anything so breathtaking in my life. I continue to flick, lick, and suck with my tongue against her sweet nub, watching her writhe above me.

It doesn't take much time. Her body has been awakened over the past two days. She desires me, desires my body the same way I yearn for hers. When she cries out, her hips thrusting forward one last time before her entire body freezes, it's my turn to moan as I feel her release against my taste buds.

I lick every ounce of her taste as her body trembles, then she releases her hands from my hair and completely relaxes. She lies back against the mattress, and her heavy sigh fills the room. Lifting my face from between her legs, I smile to myself for giving her such pleasure.

I reach for the outsides of her thighs and tug her forward so her backside hangs off the bed. I quickly unbutton and unlace my breeches before I push them down past my hips.

Wrapping my fingers around my length, I stroke myself a few times, my gaze flicking between Helmi's face and her wet center as I smile. This woman was meant for me, every single part of her. She wasn't just meant for me... she was made for my body.

Shifting forward, I align myself with her center and slowly sink inside of her to the hilt. Dipping my chin, I look between her legs, the way our bodies connect, the way she stretches for my entrance.

This woman is mine.

Now and forever.

Chapter Fourteen

KARO

IT SEEMS LIKE JUST A COUPLE OF DAYS AGO, THIS KING AND HIS queen were sitting in front of me and telling me that my bride was from another world. Now, they are watching me, curiosity clear in their expressions.

“She is indeed from your world,” I announce, dipping my chin toward Neòil. Her lips twitch into a smile, and I can tell she wishes to tell me that she knew this all along. Thankfully, she decides not to gloat.

Flicking my attention to Lachlan, I shift in my chair, placing my forearms against my thighs as I bend slightly at the waist. “A goddess came to me and told me she would be my destiny,” I state. “What murmurings do you have from the underworld?”

“I think it will begin when she has conceived your heir. My bride is pregnant, and the Queen of Katrauina is also with child again. We know not if it will be with this round of babies, but if not, then perhaps the next. We suspect all three women will be pregnant, making everything in threes before it sets the curse into motion.”

Three.

The thought of that number causes my spine to straighten. “Three women, three babies, three countries, three kings.”

“It is no coincidence,” Lachlan announces. “It is why I wished to have Kenna married and safely tucked away.”

“We shall send them off on a long honeymoon, perhaps to an island away from the triangle of our countries. The dark, the water, and the green,” I suggest.

Lachlan dips his chin. “It is either that or I hide her away at the convent again,” he grumbles.

“Lachlan,” Neòil hisses. Then she turns to face me, a very weak smile playing on her lips. “Will I be able to meet with the queen at all?” she asks.

Clearing my throat, I turn my head, my gaze finding Timo. He is standing far enough away that he cannot hear our intimate discussion. But he is close enough that I can still ask him for things or send him for Helmi.

Timo dips his chin at my demand, then turns and walks out of the room. “She is with her ladies. She grows weary and bored during the honeymoon portion of our marriage.”

“Honeymoon?” Neòil asks.

Nodding a single time, I lift my eyes to meet hers. “It is tradition that once the wedding ceremony takes place, the bride takes her duties very seriously for three months’ time. She isn’t allowed to travel, to walk about outside, to visit the village. It is almost finished, and she’ll have her freedom back.”

Neòil opens her mouth, no doubt to say something, but snaps her lips closed when Lachlan reaches over and squeezes her hand. I assume their country does not have the same traditions.

A few moments later, there is a knock on the door and Timo announces the arrival of my bride. She is dressed in her royal dress today, complete with her beaded crown. She doesn’t appear as opulent as the woman sitting across from me in overly large skirts and a crown that is raised on her head, but in my country, she is the picture of perfected beauty.

Helmi is wearing a dress that skims the floor, tight at the torso and slim to the ankles. It is emerald green in color, with a

light-pink apron around her waist and a cape that matches, which is held by an emerald-incrusted brooch at the center of her chest. There are gold ribbons that trim the cape and the skirt of her dress.

Her hair is intricately braided around the top of her head to imitate a crown, but the beaded diamond headpiece is woven into the small braids as well, making her shine as the largest pearl drop dangles right between her eyebrows.

Lachlan, Neòil, and I stand at her arrival. Her eyes are wide as she begins to make her way toward us. I had told her that we were to have visitors and a wedding, though I did not go into detail about who these people were, and I'm sure that seeing the king and queen adorned in black and deep red is a startling difference compared to the light colors of our country.

“Helmi, I would like to introduce you to the king and queen of Sgaldachadh.”

Lachlan bows slightly, but Neòil does no such thing. Instead, she rushes toward Helmi and wraps her arms around her in a hug. I watch, unsure that this is truly happening, but Lachlan chuckles as he takes it in.

“They do not follow our rules or customs at all. No matter how many times I tell her how things are to be done, she always does them her own way,” he states, and my lips twitch into a smile.

Although I have not had an opportunity to watch my bride interact publicly yet, I have a feeling she will be the same way.

“Let the women discuss their new world on their own. I must speak with you privately,” Lachlan murmurs.

Jerking my chin toward Timo, I instruct him to protect the queens, then together, Lachlan and I make our way toward my private chamber. Finding a maid on the way, I order some food and drink to be delivered to the chamber and move through the castle.

We make small talk until the food and drink arrive. Once the maids leave, it's obvious he is ready to get down to

business. He leans back in the chair, leveling me with a gaze, and clears his throat.

“We must have a plan for when the underworld begins its war. How will we contact one another? Or should we attempt to gather now and wait it out?”

I think about his words. Sending Runo and Kenna away for months or even a year was an easy decision. This, though, possibly leaving my country for months, perhaps even years? I do not think I could do that.

Lifting my hands to my face, I press them together in front of my lips as I think about his question. My country is far too isolated to gather here. We would have no soldiers for protection... or rather very few, and I am sure my men are not as well trained as Lachlan's or even Percival's.

“To leave my people for an undetermined amount of time with no king...” My words trail off.

I would trust Runo to rule in my absence, but if he is gone, hiding for protection under the guise of a honeymoon, I do not have anyone else I could give such power to presently. Lachlan and I watch one another, then he lets out a sigh. I know he understands my dilemma, though I am unsure if he has someone who could take his place as the king of his country.

“We must have a clear, decisive plan, or we will be separated by oceans and unable to fight the underworld as one. The reason, I believe, that the curse was set upon our lands since we're the farthest apart from one another on the globe.”

He is correct.

We are extremely far apart, geographically speaking, and that adds another layer to this debacle.

“Sacrifices must be made,” I mutter.

“Indeed,” he growls.

I am unsure of those sacrifices in this present moment, but I do believe that we need the third party involved before we make any decisions.

“We must send for Percival and his bride,” I announce. “If we are to make any decisions of this magnitude, we must have them here as well.”

Lachlan dips his chin. “Then we must send notice to him to come here immediately.”

Together, Lachlan and I pen a letter to the king of Katrauna, asking him for an audience with both him and his wife. Lachlan assures me that he will know what this involves without us having to put the words in writing, as when you send letters, you never know exactly whose eyes will see those words you pen.

Without anything more than a summons, a request, we ask for them to come here as soon as possible, with much haste and hope that it does not take too many months for the two to sail to my part of the world.

HELMI

NEÒIL WRAPS HER ARMS AROUND ME IN A HUG, AND FOR THE first time since landing here in this crazy land, I feel calm and at peace.

Sure, things are starting to go well with Karo, and he makes me feel all kinds of amazing, something that I didn't think was possible, but at the same time, he is not safe, and he is not home.

But Neòil is just that.

Even dressed in bloodred and black, she is warm.

“I don't know what to say...” I murmur, my words trailing off.

There is a moment of silence as she takes a step backward, her fingers wrapped around my biceps as she smiles at me. “It's weird, right?” she asks. “It's almost as if we already know one another. Just wait until you meet Soleil.”

“Is she the third?”

Neòil nods her head, taking my hand in hers before she takes another step back and moves toward the sofa to sit down again. I sit beside her on the chair, though I don't release her hand. I don't know why, but it feels good to have this physical contact.

This isn't like Anja or Ilta. This is totally different.

"Tell me everything," I beg.

Neòil smiles. She squeezes my hand, then she begins to tell me her story. I am in awe because it's full of so much magic, a dragon, and things I could only imagine. It's fantastical. And I realize that I know absolutely nothing about this country I'm in, let alone the world around me.

"What?" Neòil asks.

Releasing her hand, I place it in my lap, lacing my fingers together and squeezing them. She waits for me to tell her what I'm thinking, but the words don't come easily. I've lived my whole life in the same town on the central California coast, where I knew everyone and everything within a twenty-mile radius.

Now I'm in this place where I know nobody and absolutely nothing.

Slowly, I lift my head, my gaze finding hers for a moment before I speak. "You've had all of these great and scary adventures, and I've done nothing in my time here except be locked in a tower for weeks with two witches, one of which has no power left."

Neòil frowns, then presses her lips together, rolling them a few times. I can tell she is deep in thought, but about what, I'm unsure. Then she clears her throat and stands. She moves through the room, heading straight for a window, and stares out at the landscape in front of her, one that I know is absolutely amazing and beautiful.

"Locked in a tower?" she exhales.

I almost laugh because that is what bothers her the most? "I woke up beside Karo, who had his naked body pressed to my back. He thought that I was his new bride."

Her body spins around so fast that, for a moment, I wonder if she has magical powers. “What do you mean, he thought you were his new bride?”

Clearing my throat, I glance around and try not to make eye contact with her, but I fail. “He married my twin, consummated that marriage, and then the next morning, woke up beside me.”

This is the first time I’ve actually said what happened out loud. I want to scream and cry, but I decide against it. Instead, I watch her, waiting for her reaction. I don’t know why, but I assume it will be nonchalant, much like Karo’s when he speaks of Meri.

But it’s not.

Her eyes widen, and she sucks in a breath. “You mean they had sex, and then you came here? You’re not bound to him?”

“I look like her,” I say, waving my hand in front of my face as if she doesn’t know that I am the woman’s twin.

She shakes her head slowly. “You aren’t married. There has been no ceremony, and she could be pregnant because I know that these men do not use contraception with their wives. This could throw the whole thing into a tailspin,” she snaps. “We have to get Lachlan.”

Shit.

None of this sounds good.

At all.

My heart starts to race, and I wonder if I’ve done something to mess this thing up by telling Neòil what happened. Then I think about the fact that she thought the same thing about a possible pregnancy.

That scares me and makes me feel a bit nauseous.

There could be another woman walking around with Karo’s baby. I can’t even call him my husband because although he says I’m his queen, I never married him.

But I didn't do anything wrong, at least not that I know of. Now I'm wondering if I should have done something different and at least spoken up and asked some more questions. Not that I could ask a lot when I was locked in a tower in a strange world.

This whole thing makes me want to curl into a ball, close my eyes, and wait to be taken back home. Because right now, no matter how Karo makes me feel, the way Neòil is looking at me, I think I should maybe try to get back home instead of staying here.

Chapter Fifteen

KARO

THE MESSAGE HAS BEEN SENT TO PERCIVAL. EVERYONE RESTED in the afternoon, and now we're dining together. Runo and Kenna are sitting beside one another, their heads dipped as they whisper softly, no doubt sweet-nothings.

Once the food has been served and we begin to eat, Lachlan clears his throat. He's holding up his cup, a smile playing on his lips.

"I would like to make a toast," he calls out. "To the three brave women from the other world. To Karo for his hospitality, to Runo and Kenna on their upcoming nuptials. May we all prosper because we will win this battle."

Everyone calls out enthusiastic *cheers* and takes a hearty drink. I flick my gaze around the room as the conversations return to a low hum.

Anja and Ilta chatter with one another, their gazes lifting every so often to take in the table as well. I know they do not plot maliciously, but they are plotting. Probably making plans for when the underworld attacks.

Helmi and Neòil have their heads bent, their murmurings no doubt about their homeland, and every so often, I see Helmi touch Neòil's protruding belly. Lachlan clears his throat, interrupting me from my observations.

Lifting my head, I look over to him. "Yes?" I ask.

“It’s come to my attention, through ladies being ladies and gossiping amongst one another, that you are not actually married to your queen,” he murmurs.

My heart slams against my chest at his words. Tilting my head to the side, I try to give him all my attention, as I do not completely understand what it is that he’s saying to me. Lifting my hands, I place them flat on the table as I give Lachlan my devoted focus.

“What is it you are implying?” I ask when he doesn’t continue.

He frowns, his gaze searching mine for a moment before he speaks. “I am saying that the marriage you had was with your wife’s twin. I do not know what this means for the underworld, for the curse. I admit that I do not know much about these things. I can bring in my witches. Perhaps they know more. However, I think it possibly could have an effect on the world.”

This was not something I had considered. I assumed because she was her twin, the marriage was now legitimate in the eyes of the law and the gods.

“Is it truthful that the previous wife could indeed be with child?”

My heart, which is currently slamming against my chest, threatens to land on the plate in front of me. Forcing myself to inhale a deep breath, I hold it for a moment before I release it slowly. Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I stare at him, wondering why he’s thought of this when I have not.

“I would not know where to find her to discover if she were or not. Do you believe we should have a ceremony?”

Lachlan doesn’t say anything immediately. He watches me, then his gaze flicks over to the witches. “One of them should be able to find her, no?”

“Perhaps,” I exhale as I stand to my feet. “Come.” Then I turn toward the witches. “Anja and Ilta, now,” I growl.

Walking out of the dining hall, I move toward my *toimisto*, the three of them behind me. Once inside, I lift my hand

toward the chair across from my desk for Lachlan and choose to stand at the front of my desk, my back leaning against the wood edge.

“Where is Meri?” I demand.

The women are standing across from me, and I watch as their eyes widen. “Ilta,” I warn. “Tell me where she is.”

She flicks her gaze down to her feet and mumbles her next few words. “I sent her away.”

She does not wish to tell me where which means she is still in this world. Lachlan figures it out at the same time I do, except he verbalizes it before I can. “In this world, then?” he asks. “You would not do something so stupid, would you?”

Ilta stays silent.

She stays silent for far too long.

“Witch,” Lachlan barks. “Answer.”

Silence.

Then Ilta clears her throat, slowly lifting her head. Her eyes find Lachlan’s, and she speaks. When she does, the answer is not what I had hoped but what I’d already known, judging by her reactions and actions this evening.

“She is still in this world. I’ve sent her away, but yes, she is here.”

“Why?” I grind out. “Unless the gods told you that was acceptable.”

“They did not,” she whispers. “Meri was scared, Your Highness. She was terrified, and I could not send her away.”

Her words come out slowly, her eyes shifting back to the floor. It is obvious that she had hoped she would never have to admit what she’d done. Anja sucks in a breath, then hisses before I hear her mumble.

“You didn’t, Ilta.”

“I did,” Ilta snaps. “The gods came to me. They told me what I needed to do, but Meri had already had her marriage

night. She had already left her entire family. I couldn't make her leave the only world she knew, too. She was terrified."

"Bring her here," I grind out. "Immediately."

"That's the problem," Ilta murmurs, her gaze lifting to meet mine. Her eyes are wet with unshed tears. Her chest rises and falls as she tries to catch herself. "I don't know where she is. I sent her away, but I don't know where she went."

Slamming my hands down on the desk, I push myself up to stand. Turning toward the door, I walk out of the room and head straight for Timo. I know he is not far. In fact, he's standing just across the hall from the *toimisto*.

"Find Meri. She is somewhere in this world. Send whoever, wherever they need to go, but bring her to me as soon as possible," I demand.

Timo's eyes widen. He shifts his attention to the door behind me, then brings it back to meet mine. "Meri is still in this world?" he asks softly. "How?"

Timo typically doesn't ask many questions. He's primarily seen and not heard, so for him to ask me this means he is concerned. "The *noita* did not send her away to another world. Instead, she sent her somewhere in our world but does not know where."

"And she is your legal wife and could be with child," he murmurs.

"You overheard?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I did not. Just processing things. I will take this mission on myself, Your Highness."

Timo jerks his chin in my direction, turns, and leaves without another word. I watch him go, knowing he will, without a doubt, find Meri if she is anywhere in this world. When he's out of sight, I make my way back into the *toimisto*.

Walking inside, I can feel the tension. "Timo is on his way to find Meri. Somewhere. Anywhere. What else do I need to know?"

Silence fills the room.

I am angry, frustrated, and disgusted with myself for having lain with the woman. It doesn't matter that she was my wife. Is my wife. I know deep down that I didn't do anything wrong, but now it seems as if I've betrayed my destined bride, my Helmi.

I cannot imagine being with anyone else. But there is the simple fact that I have been with others, and the bottom line, the truth of it, is that Meri could be carrying my child. I must find her. We have to know for certain.

HELMI

STANDING IN MY NEW BEDROOM, WHICH IS KARO'S ROOM, I look around and wonder what is going to happen next. It's clear that there are things brewing, things I know nothing about, things that are being kept from me.

I've been bathed by maids and dressed for bed, something I don't think I'll ever quite get used to. Though Neoil assures me it will get easier to accept. I just don't think it will. Right now, that's the least of my worries.

Standing at the window, I look out at the black sea. It's too dark to see the water. The waves move, but that's about all I can see. It's beautiful in a way, and I wish I could get lost in it all and leave this whole life behind.

I've never been one who wanted to walk away from my life. Even at its worst, everything has been tolerable. This doesn't feel tolerable. Not at all. And I can feel the foreboding. It hangs above me, causing me to feel extreme anxiety.

When the door behind me opens, I don't even have to look to see who is walking into the room. I feel him. His presence is so extreme that one's entire being is aware when he's nearby. Or maybe it's just me. I'm not sure.

His feet are swift as they carry him toward me. I can feel his body heat against my back; he stands so close to me, and yet he does not touch me. I'm wearing a thin fabric chemise nightgown with a sheer dressing gown over the top, tied just beneath my breasts.

Closing my eyes, I feel his palm press against the center of my back, then slide up my spine until his fingers tangle in my hair. “You are quiet,” he states.

“There is something brewing,” I whisper.

“You feel it?” he asks.

Instead of answering, I pinch my eyes closed for a breath, then open them and turn around to face him. Tilting my head back, I lift my eyes to his. His hand stays buried in my hair, his eyes on mine, and a small smile tips his lips.

“It’s Meri, isn’t it?”

His smile dies instantly, his eyes widen, and I don’t know why he looks surprised, but he does. He releases his grasp on me, taking a step backward, then turns his back to me and lifts his hand. I watch as he combs his fingers through his hair before he slowly turns around to face me again.

“Meri is not your concern, Helmi. Let me worry about her. All you need to think about, worry about, is the future of our country,” he murmurs, extending his arm as he places his palm on my belly.

I’m his breeding animal. As long as we do the deed and I’m able to conceive, that is all he cares about. It shouldn’t bother me as much as it does. He doesn’t abuse me. He’s been gentle and kind even when he wanted nothing to do with me. He’s always made sure that I was taken care of and safe.

But this does bother me.

I can now understand all of the women in history who were treated like chattel, and I don’t like it one single bit.

“It is my concern, Karo. She could have your baby. And the way Neòil made it sound, that could mess everything up.”

He grunts but doesn’t respond immediately. Instead, he watches me for a moment, his eyes searching mine before he nods once as if he’s made some kind of decision. Wordlessly, he marches toward me. I take a few steps backward, slamming against the stone wall.

One of his hands lifts. His fingers curl around the side of my throat firmly. The other one he uses to grip my waist as he leans forward. I gasp when his lips touch mine before he finally speaks. When he does, his words come out on a low growl.

“It matters not. You are mine.”

Then his lips slam against my own.

Hard.

Chapter Sixteen

HELMI

KARO REACHES DOWN, WRAPPING HIS HANDS BEHIND MY thighs, and picks me up. I'm forced to wrap my legs around his waist as he presses my back against the stone wall. Abruptly, he breaks the kiss, his gaze searching mine for a silent moment.

Sucking in a breath, I hold it as I watch him, wondering what he's going to say because I can tell he has something on his mind. He doesn't say anything. He continues to search my gaze, then he leans his face forward again and touches his mouth to mine, this time in a soft and even sweet kiss.

His tongue sweeps through my mouth, tasting me as his fingers find their way between my legs. My breath hitches, my head falling backward and bouncing against the stone wall. If it hurt when it touched the wall, I don't feel it.

My hips move as his fingers touch me. I can feel my body climbing higher and higher. The achiness between my legs is almost completely vanished, and all I can feel is pleasure. Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I suppress the whimper that threatens to escape.

Karo's mouth finds my neck. His lips suck, his tongue tastes, and my body breaks out in goose bumps. His fingers never stop moving. They work me closer and closer to an orgasm. I'm standing on the edge, looking over and ready to jump.

Then it happens.

The orgasm rushes through me, taking me almost by surprise. Not that I wasn't expecting it, but I wasn't anticipating the intensity of it. It's almost as if it's all-consuming. Like I'm not really in the room. I'm just looking at this whole scene from somewhere else, but the feeling is so intense that it's etched into my bones.

I lift my head, my lips part, and I let out a silent cry as my torso and thighs begin to quake. Then, sweet release, relief, and awe. Karo doesn't stop. His fingers continue, and I'm so sensitive that it begins to hurt.

Reaching between us, I wrap my fingers around his wrist and attempt to pull his hand away, but he shakes his head. "You are mine," he rasps. "You will come again, and again, and again, until you know for certain who you belong to."

My bottom lip trembles. I nod but can't speak. The sensation is too much. I don't know why it hurts or how. It's overly sensitive, and as I try to breathe through the pain, I hope it gets better because right now, all I want to do is wiggle away from him.

"Relax, *rakas*. It will feel good. I would not hurt you. Not in this way," he murmurs against my throat.

His fingers continue. They slide through my folds, slowly caressing me ever so gently. Then they swirl my clit and focus there. The pain begins to ebb, and that want and desire starts to take over again.

"Karo," I exhale.

He hums but doesn't speak. Instead, he touches, he feels, he caresses. I find myself climbing closer and closer again. I don't know how it's happened, how it's *happening*.

Then.

He.

Stops.

Both of his hands grip my thighs, and he takes a step backward. His eyes on mine, he doesn't say anything, but he

begins to move through the bedroom and to the four-poster bed. I don't know what I'm expecting, but it isn't for him to set me down on the edge of the bed.

"Karo," I call out.

He chuckles, taking half a step backward, and I watch as he removes his breeches and shirt, exposing his entire naked body to me. I can't keep myself from staring. I've seen him naked before, but I don't think I've ever seen him quite like this.

The fireplace is roaring, there is light in the room, and he's standing just a few feet away from me. Pressing my lips together, I can't help but stare at him.

"Is there anything amiss?" he asks.

Tearing my gaze from his length, I slide my attention up his beautiful bare chest until I reach his eyes. He's got a smirk on his face as he watches me. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," I breathe.

He laughs softly as he begins to move toward me. "Will you take off your chemise?" he asks.

Reaching for the string of the dressing gown, I tug on it and let it slide off my shoulders. Then I grasp the hem of my chemise, gently glide it up my body, and throw it somewhere in the room. I hear the fabric glide through the air and know it lands somewhere on the floor.

"*Rakas*," he rasps.

"What does that mean?" I ask.

He reaches for my ankles and gently glides his hands up my thighs, his fingers sending shivers of desire throughout my entire body. When they find my outer thighs, he shifts them to my inner thighs and spreads me open.

"It means beloved," he rasps, taking a step forward.

He wraps his fingers around his length and gently strokes himself. I don't know why I'm so enthralled by the action, but

I lick my lips at the sight of it. He moves closer to me, then stands so close that I can feel his head at my center.

Karo's fingers leave my thighs and wrap around my waist as he tugs me forward, at the same time burying himself completely inside of me. He doesn't move immediately. Instead, he watches me, allowing me to become used to his invasion.

His fingers grip my waist tighter, holding me as he begins to move inside of me. I feel my breasts bounce with each thrust. One of his hands leaves my hip to slide up the center of my chest until he wraps his fingers around the front of my throat. His other hand shifts and I feel his thumb press against my clit.

Whimpering, I lift my hands and wrap my fingers around his wrists. He doesn't stop. Instead, his hips move harder and faster, his thumb the same. I climb higher and higher. Inching closer and closer to the edge.

I'm ready to fall, to jump, and then it happens.

I come again.

My entire body tenses, my muscles stiffen, and I cry out. He doesn't stop. His hips continue, although his thrusts become uneven, hard, erratic, and I love them. Then he buries himself deep inside of me, and a roar fills the entire room.

His fingers squeeze my throat, flexing, his gaze holding mine, his jaw clenching.

* * *

KARO'S FINGERS COMB THROUGH MY HAIR AS HE HOLDS ME close, but all of the thoughts of Meri and the potential baby flood my mind. Tipping my head back, I look up into his eyes. I shouldn't say anything, not a single word, but I can't help myself.

"This situation with Meri isn't going to go away. This curse isn't going to vanish."

He doesn't say anything immediately but tugs on the end of my hair. "I meant it when I said you let me worry about Meri, about all of it."

"I can't help it. I'm troubled," I exhale.

The room is shrouded in silence as he continues to comb his fingers through my hair, down my back, to my hip and ass, then back up. "Sleep, *rakas*. Tomorrow, we have a new adventure awaiting us."

"We do?" I ask.

There is a moment of silence as he pulls me a bit closer. "Sure we do, Helmi. Every single day since you've come into my world has been a new adventure. I find myself looking forward to them."

Closing my eyes, I let out a heavy sigh and rest my head against his chest. As I slip off to sleep, I wonder if Meri will come back. I wonder if all this curse stuff is going to end. I wonder what, if anything, I'll be able to do to stop any of it.

I wonder all these things as I fall asleep, all things I can't answer. All things that don't bring Nilo here to be with me. All things I have zero control over. When I finally fall completely asleep, I expect it to be deep.

I've been physically satisfied, and I'm exhausted. It's been a wild day, but my brain doesn't shut off. Instead, I feel as if I'm running a marathon. My brain won't quit assaulting me with dreams of my family, Nilo and my parents. Then, dreams of Karo, his brother Runo, Kenna, Neòil, and even Lachlan fill my head.

Finally, right before dawn, another dream comes to me, and it is so realistic that I sit straight up, gasping for air. Placing my hand in the center of my chest, I close my eyes and inhale deeply, then let it out slowly. I try to take calming breaths in an attempt to calm myself.

Looking to the side of the bed, I expect to see Karo lying beside me, but the bed is empty. Frowning, I reach out and touch the sheets. I expect them to be warm. I think perhaps he's just gotten up to use the bathroom, but they're cold.

I throw my legs over the side of the bed, letting my feet touch the cold stone flooring. I hiss at the sensation, wondering how it's gotten so cold when it was warm just a few hours ago.

Walking through the room, I look for my dressing gown robe, but there is nothing. In just my see-through chemise nightgown, I go for it and reach for the handle, tugging the heavy door open. I'm not sure what will greet me on the other side, but I freeze when it does.

Something isn't right.

Silence.

Solitude.

Nothingness.

The door opens, but the hallway isn't the same as the one that was here before I went to sleep. There is just a short distance from the door to the wall. I can touch the wall without having to even reach for it, and it's curved.

"What on earth?" I whisper.

Turning my head to the side, I find a curved staircase. This definitely was not here before. Shifting my weight from foot to foot, I contemplate making my way down those stairs to check what's at the bottom.

I'm not sure if I should go back into the bedroom, lock the door, close my eyes, and force myself to fall back asleep in hopes that when I wake up, I'm back where I belong, beside Karo. But curiosity killed the cat, and tonight, you can call me Cat.

On my tiptoes, barefoot, I move down the steps of the staircase, hugging the side of the curved stone wall, and try to be as small, quiet, and unseen as I move slowly toward the bottom and the unknown.

Although to be fair, everything in this world is "the unknown" to me.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I'm not sure what I expect. But it isn't *nothing*. It's empty. Scanning the small

round room, I wonder what the hell is happening. This is very much not where I fell asleep. It's also not my home in California, so I know I haven't been transported back there.

Then a thought slams into me. What if I have been spirited away to a whole other world? I didn't think to ask anyone if there were any more of these parallel universes, but it would make sense that there are.

There is one door in the circular foyer-type room. I reach for the handle and push, but it doesn't budge. Looking around, I try to find a lock or button that could possibly help me open the door, but there is nothing.

Just a handle.

The silence around me is deafening. My heart slams against my chest, and I hold my breath for a moment as I try to think about what to do. Slowly, I let the air out and spin around in a circle, taking in everything around me.

For lighting, there are dim torches hanging along the walls. There is no artwork, no carpets, not even any tapestries. All things that have been in abundance at the castle where I've been living, so I'm not there, that much is quite evident.

But where am I? And how do I get out of here?

Then, before I can go back to my room, a gust of wind comes from somewhere and the torches on the walls are all blown out, leaving me in complete darkness. My stomach clenches, and I let out a loud gasp that bounces off the stone walls around me as if it's amplified.

The sickness I feel only gets worse as the seconds pass and I wonder if I'll be able to keep from throwing up. I know without a doubt that something is really, really wrong.

Chapter Seventeen

KARO

SILENCE.

Reaching for Helmi, I frown when the sheets are cold. I sit up and look around. The sun is shining through the crack in the thick drapes, but she is nowhere to be seen. I press my lips together, my brows snapping as I blink a few times, the situation sinking in that she is not in this room. I can feel it.

Quickly, I scramble out of bed, not even bothering to put clothes on and pull the chamber door open. Timo is there, his eyes wide as he stares at me. I don't know why he's here and not searching for Meri, but he opens his mouth and then slams it shut as he waits for me to speak.

“Where is Helmi?” I demand.

His wide eyes shift to the side before they flick back to meet my gaze. “I do not know,” he confesses.

“Meri?” I ask.

There is a moment of silence as he rocks back on his heels. “I brought her here in the middle of the night. She rests in the queen's quarters, as I was unsure of where you would like her placed, and I knew that Queen Helmi was in your chamber.”

“How long have you been standing there across from my door?” I question.

He clears his throat, dipping his chin in a single quick nod. “I have been here since bringing Meri into the castle. She is under lock and key with her own guard. I chose to stay here so that I could tell you immediately.”

“Since the wee hours of the morning, then?” I ask.

“Yes,” he agrees.

“And my door did not open?”

“No.”

“Can you quietly, unsuspectingly, go in search of Helmi? Perhaps she has ventured off to the kitchens?” I ask. “I will go and ready myself for the day.”

“You do not wish me to help you?”

Shaking my head, I clear my throat. “Helmi is your focus in this moment, Timo.”

He jerks his chin, turns on his heels, and swiftly leaves me standing naked in the hall. I turn back to the bedchamber, where I quickly change into something to wear for the day. It doesn’t take me long—a pair of breeches, a shirt, some boots. I am not a man who requires much.

Wondering if Helmi has gone in search of Neòil, I do the same. The king and queen of Sgaldachadh are easily found as they are sitting in the breakfast room eating their morning meal. Both of them turn their heads, smiles playing on their lips. As they watch me approach, their smiles fade, and it’s clear they realize something is amiss.

“What is it?” Lachlan asks.

Kenna’s eyes lift to meet mine, and without question, Runo rises to his feet, knowing there is something wrong. If anyone in this castle can read my moods, it is Runo. Though he does not speak, he waits for me to approach.

I move closer. I don’t wish for the staff to hear me. Once I’m beside them, I tip my chin and look into their eyes.

“Have you seen Helmi this morning?”

Neòil's eyes widen, and an expression of fear crosses her face. I do not like the look of that. I open my mouth but am not able to get a word out before she speaks.

“Are you saying she's missing?” she hisses at the same time Kenna lets out a gasp.

“When I awoke this morning, she was not beside me; the sheets were cold. I have not seen her anywhere. Timo, my personal guard, is searching for her in the kitchens and anywhere else she could have gotten off to.”

Neòil quickly stands, her quick movements taking me off guard. Lachlan slowly stands as well, his hand lifting as he places it against the small of his wife's back. “We need the witches,” Neòil whispers.

“I will send for them,” I murmur.

“As will I.” She smirks.

Arching a brow, I watch her in confusion. Her lips curve up into a smirk. “I will call for the dragon to bring my own. The more, the merrier. I must get in contact with the dragon. I know he is close by, as he's never far from my side,” Neòil announces.

“I will join you,” Kenna states, and I jerk my chin toward Runo, who is more than happy to help his bride-to-be with any task at all since he is completely smitten with her.

Turning toward Lachlan, I clear my throat. “It seems as if it may be time to wed them and send them away sooner rather than later,” I murmur.

“I was thinking the same thing,” he grinds out. “Kenna must be kept safe at all costs.”

I can understand his worry, as I feel the same about Runo, but my bride is missing, so it is hard for me to think of any others ahead of her. Inhaling a deep breath, I hold it for a moment before I let it out slowly.

“Karo,” a familiar voice calls out.

Turning my head, I see Helmi casually moving toward me, except...

“That is not her,” Lachlan mutters as if speaking to himself.

He is correct. That is not her. That is my sweet bride, Meri. “Meri,” I murmur.

Lachlan doesn’t say anything else right away. Instead, he stands beside me, his body stiff and unmoving. He is frozen to the floor, and I am as well. Neither of us moves or speaks. We simply watch as Meri approaches with a smile playing on her lips as if she is in the happiest of moods.

“Where is Helmi?” I demand, coming out of my stupor.

Her smile fades, her expression faltering for a moment before she goes back to her smiling self and shakes her head a couple of times. Then she takes another step toward me and another. I’m still frozen in my place, and so is Lachlan beside me.

When Meri reaches us, she wraps her fingers around mine and squeezes my hand, her gaze searching mine. “I do not know where that woman is, but I am here.”

Her words seem sincere, but her gaze is hollow. It’s as if there is nothingness behind her eyes, and the longer I stare at her face, the more I begin to feel sick to my stomach.

There is nothing there.

She is an empty shell, and I wonder who has control over her. This is not the same woman I married just a few weeks ago.

HELMI

MY BODY LIFTS OFF THE FLOOR, AND I FIND MYSELF FLOATING up the stairs and back where I came from, back to that room. I can’t even scream. The breath is sucked from my body as I fly through the air, actually *fly*. Then I’m deposited on the bed, and my body lands with a hard thud and one bounce.

It’s still pitch black, and no matter how many times I blink, I can see absolutely nothing. I thought waking up naked next

to a strange man in a whole new world was scary, but this is worse.

It seems like every other minute, something terrifying happens to me here. This is probably the scariest, though, mainly because they've taken away a major sense, whoever *they* are. I still can't see shit.

There is a noise to the left, or maybe it's the right. I can't quite tell. I press my lips together, breathing through my nose as I try to be as still and noiseless as possible. I almost close my eyes out of fear but realize that it won't do any good, so I just stare into the darkness and wait for whatever that noise is to get me.

My entire body trembles as I wait, the anticipation causing me to feel even sicker than I did a few moments ago as I was flying through the air, but then, magically, the torches in the room are lit again and so is the fire in the fireplace.

Letting out a trembling exhale, I shift my eyes around the room and look for the person or thing that has done this to me. Then, my gaze finds the source.

It's a woman.

She's just as beautiful as Anja and Ilta, except there is something about her that causes me to pause instead of matching her smile with one of my own.

"You are here to be kept safe, Helmi," she calls out, her voice a lyrical song.

Frowning, I look down at my lap, then shift my attention back up to meet hers. "Where are Anja and Ilta?" I ask, knowing they are the ones who would keep me safe along with Karo.

The woman's lips curve up into a smirk on one side. It's clear that she is annoyed, and yet she still tries to appear sweet. It doesn't work. It's clear to me that she is anything but sweet. The darkness behind her gaze is vibrant if you stare long enough.

"They are protecting King Karo," she lies. "You are vital to the cause, Helmi. Which is why keeping you in a tower is

crucial.”

Tower.

“Am I in Karo’s tower? Where he kept me a few weeks ago?” I ask, grasping at straws and wondering if I’ll be able to get the news out to him of where I am.

She shakes her head slowly. “No, you’re in a much safer place,” she coos. “Rest, Queen.”

I watch as she takes a step backward, then another, until she reaches the door. “What is your name?” I ask, my words coming out in a rush.

She lifts a brow, her gaze focusing on me again, and then I hear her voice... but her lips don’t move. I hear her words inside my own head, and my heart slams against my chest, threatening to jump out and land on my lap.

“*Johanna.*”

Then she’s gone. She doesn’t even open and close the door. She just vanishes before my eyes. I stare at the closed door and the space in front of me that she just vacated unblinkingly. I’m not sure what to think about what I just saw, and I have nobody to ask about it either.

What I *do* know is that neither Anja nor Ilta have ever disappeared in front of me the way Johanna just did.

There is something suspicious about this entire thing.

I don’t know if she’s really here to help me, to protect me, but judging by the darkness behind her eyes, I think I might have just been kidnapped by this underworld that everyone is always talking about.

I’m not sure what to do about any of this. I don’t have any magic. I don’t have any way to get to Karo, Anja, or Ilta. All I can do is try not to piss this lady off and hope they somehow find me.

They will find me, won’t they?

I mean, there’s no way I’ll be stuck locked away in this room forever... is there?

Chapter Eighteen

KARO

MY INITIAL THOUGHT IS TO LOCK MERI BACK IN HER TOWER, the place she was raised until I know what to do with her. I don't do that, though. Instead, I allow her to stay in the queen's chambers, though it's the last place I want her to be.

Anja and Ilta do not look excited at hearing the news that Helmi is gone and Meri is back. They share a glance with one another, then look back to me. Lachlan shifts in his seat, clearly feeling the same way as I am right now—uncomfortable.

“I do not like this,” Lachlan rumbles.

“I agree,” Ilta states. “There is something amiss. Where is Queen Helmi?”

“Indeed,” I grind out right as there is a knock on the private chamber door.

I've decided to hold this meeting in my private chambers, knowing there is no secret access to this room. In fact, there is one secret exit, but nobody knows where it is except me. That is, unless my father told someone, and if that is the case, they are likely all dead or have been removed from the property before my marriage.

“Enter,” I call out.

The door opens, and Timo stands on the other side. He appears to be defeated. It's been hours since he left me to go in

search of Helmi. The way he's staring at me, I know this is not good news.

"Timo," I murmur.

Slowly, he moves into the room. Anja closes the heavy door behind him with a loud thud. He doesn't speak as he moves farther into the room until he stops directly in front of me. He lifts his gaze to meet mine, then he closes his eyes and shakes his head once before he opens his lids and connects his gaze to mine again.

"I cannot find her, Your Highness. Not a single person has seen her anywhere. I fear for her safety."

I cannot say I don't feel the exact same way. Shifting my gaze to Lachlan, I arch a brow and stare at him for a moment. He shakes his head once, then he speaks.

"We must find out if the underworld has started its games. I have a feeling that spirited Helmi away could have been their first one."

I have a feeling he's correct. This is the beginning, and we haven't been able to send Runo and Kenna away. It seems as if Lachlan is thinking the same thing because he stands and runs his fingers through his hair before he continues.

"We must have their marriage quietly and quickly. They have to leave before anything else happens."

Jerking my chin, I lift my hand, extend my arm, and clap him on the shoulder. "I agree," I murmur. "If they wish to have a large celebration upon their return, I would not be opposed to that," I offer.

Lachlan's lips curve up into a grin. "I quite like the sound of that. A celebration of victory and their nuptials at the same time."

I like the sound of it, too. Giving him a smirk, I jerk my chin toward Timo. "Find the officiant," I order. "He will marry them within the hour."

Lachlan dips his chin and takes a step forward. "I will inform Neòil. She will ready Kenna."

My lips curve up into a smile and I jerk my chin in his direction. “I will send for Runo as well.”

He leaves the chamber, Timo following him. I’m left alone with Anja and Ilta. Shifting my attention to Ilta, the only one of the two who holds any great power, I level her with a gaze. She takes a step toward me, then another, before she stops directly in front of me.

“I cannot help you. My magic has been depleted,” she whispers.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I wish I could demand, order, or force her to do what I need. The simple fact is that when it comes to magic, you cannot simply compel witches to have powers. Shifting my attention over to Anja, I tilt my head to the side.

“I am not a *noita*,” she whispers. “I have no abilities that way. I am just a *tietäjä*.”

She may be just that, except I believe there is more to her that she’s not telling me. Tilting my head farther, I stare at her. Watch her. Wait for her. She doesn’t say anything immediately but instead shifts her attention to Ilta, then her gaze finds mine.

“There might be one person,” she whispers. “But you do not want her magic. You do not want any part of her. In fact, you want to pretend she does not exist. We can figure this out without her.”

I’m not sure what the right answer is here. What I do know is that my queen is gone and Meri is here. This cannot be good for the curse, for the underworld, and I know it is all connected. I would not be surprised if Meri had been taken over and is part of the whole curse now.

Turning to Ilta, I take a step toward her. “Tell me, Ilta,” I begin, “where was Meri? Where did you send her?”

She shakes her head. “I was supposed to send her to Helmi’s world, but she begged me not to. I felt bad for her. I believed I had been visited by the gods, but what if I was wrong and I sent poor Meri to her death? I couldn’t do that, so I sent her somewhere, anywhere but here.”

“You must not have sent her far. Timo found her within hours,” I grind out. “Which means she has been here this whole time, and I don’t know why, but that bothers me.”

“It is bothersome. I did not think I had kept her that close. I thought she would be on a whole other continent.”

“What happens now?” Anja asks. “We must have a plan other than sending Kenna and Runo away.”

I honestly do not know. I could send a search party for Helmi, but I have no idea where she is. If a dark entity took her from me, she could be anywhere, even another world. Walking away from the women, I make my way to the window and stare out.

I think about the future as I look out at the landscape. The same landscape that Helmi enjoyed looking at often. Lifting my arm, I curl my fingers around the side of the window as I look out at nothingness.

If there is something there, I don’t see it. I see nothing. It seems as if my vision went with my queen. There is nothing. Absolutely nothing. For the first time in my life, I am unsure of what to do exactly.

I’ve always known what to do in any situation.

Always.

Except this time, when it is the most important decision in my entire life.

I have nothing.

HELMI

I’M NOT SURE HOW LONG I SIT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BED, MY legs crossed and tears falling from my eyes. But it’s so long that the sun comes up and a tray of food appears just a few feet away from me.

Forcing myself off the bed, I stumble slightly, my legs having fallen asleep some time ago. The tingling sensation

consumes my limbs, and my knees buckle as I fall to the floor in front of the tray of food.

I'm not hungry. My belly flips and squeezes in pain. I'm nervous. I'm upset. I want to curl into a ball and cry. But I don't. Instead, I reach for a piece of bread and lift it to my lips, closing my eyes as I take a bite.

All the food is probably poisoned. But I'm starving. I don't care anymore. Shoving the bread into my mouth, I try to chew as quickly as I can, wondering if it will ever fill me up. It's as if my stomach is a bottomless pit right now. I don't think I have ever been this hungry in my entire life.

When I've finally had enough, which is about at the end of loaf two, I toss it on the tray and reach for the cup of water. Lifting it to my lips, I suck down a hearty gulp, but I don't drink too much, knowing that if I do, the bread will just expand, and I'll be completely sick because I seriously choked down almost two huge loaves of bread in a manner of minutes.

Sitting back, I rest against the side of the bed, dropping my head back as I quietly stare at the way the ceiling makes a circle. The beautiful, intricate woodwork seems to go on and on forever.

When I pinch my eyes closed tightly, I can still see the design. It's as if it is etched inside of my eyelids. I suck in a breath, hold it for a moment, then open my eyes again when I feel as if someone is watching me.

I'm right.

She's here.

Standing in front of the closed door. Her head tipped to the side. Her eyes focus on me as if she is trying to figure something out. She acts as if she is the one with the questions. Meanwhile, I'm the one who was kidnapped because of some mysterious curse in some world that I didn't know even existed.

"What?" I ask when she doesn't say anything immediately.

"I'm just thinking. Wondering, really," she murmurs. Again, her voice floats around me, not really landing

anywhere in particular.

Then she sucks in a deep breath and bends slightly, her gaze never leaving mine. I don't ask her what she's wondering. I figure she's going to tell me without me having to pry it out of her.

"I'm wondering why the gods chose you. There is nothing special about you, human. I cannot smell any magic flowing through your being." She breathes deeply. "Except for the life you carry, there is nothing else."

"The what?" I exhale, my voice trembling.

Her lips twitch. "You do not know? You are pregnant. The heir to your husband's throne grows inside of you," she murmurs.

"Grows inside of me," I whisper.

"This tower is where you will stay until our work in this world is complete."

"And after?" I ask though I'm not sure I really want to know.

In fact, I'm positive I don't want to know, especially when her lips curve up into a smile and she moves closer, crouching down in front of me, but I'm pretty sure she could have just floated over here instead of walking.

Her lips smile, but it is not a happy one, more like a menacing one. She's got something behind those dead eyes of hers, something that I don't think I ever want to see unleashed. But the way she's watching me, I have a feeling I will... sooner rather than later.

"After, Queen," she purrs. "After will be the fun part."

The way she speaks. The words she says. They send chills up and down my spine. She disappears again before I can say anything else, though I'm not quite sure I want to ask her a single question at this point.

I'm scared to fucking death that she's going to do some creepy magical stuff to me and kill me right here and now, and I don't even really know where I am. Lifting my hand, I place

my palm against my belly, dipping my chin as I look down at my flat stomach.

Flat for now.

Slowly, I force myself to stand and move toward the window. There is only one window in this circular room, this turret tower, and I've been avoiding it since waking up here alone and horrified.

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I scan the landscape. It looks similar to where I was with Karo. Except the ocean seems to be a bit closer. Frowning, I wonder if I'm in the same country, like within shouting distance?

It all looks so much like my home with Karo. Bright green grass and trees with hot-pink flowers—like a painting. My long braid falls over the side of the window, and I laugh to myself, feeling very much like Rapunzel from the fairy tale.

Chapter Nineteen

KARO

STANDING AT THE EDGE OF THE CLIFF, I WATCH AS THE BOAT sails away. It carries Kenna and my brother. Now united, but not the way either of them deserve. Frowning, I flick my gaze down to my feet, then slowly lift it back up again to see the boat glide across the ocean.

I'm unused to not having Runo at my side. He's always been a constant for me. Not only my brother by blood but my companion as well. He's ridden beside me in battle. He stood beside me when I was at my lowest low and my highest high.

This does not feel right.

"Does it feel as if part of you is being ripped from your own body?" Lachlan needlessly asks.

"You know that it does," I mutter.

He grunts. "I do."

We stand beside one another, not speaking, as we watch the boat until it appears to vanish into the sea. I'm not exactly sure what to say to him, though I know we have much work to do. Part of it is trying to figure out how to get this handled as swiftly as possible with the underworld. It is clear their wheels are already in motion.

Before I can say anything to Lachlan, I hear a sweet voice call out my name from behind. Turning my head, I see Meri moving toward us. I did not lock her away in her room the

way I should have. I've been a bit busy to make that a priority, but she's reminding me now.

Frowning, I clench my jaw as I watch her approach. She stops directly in front of me with her wide, dead eyes and her bright, fake smile. "I was looking for you."

"Were you?" I ask, attempting to appear as if she does not bother me in any way. I'm not sure I do a satisfactory job at it, though.

My teeth are clenched as I attempt to stay polite. What I really want to do is pick her up, throw her in her room, and lock the door before throwing away the key forever. I don't care if she shrivels up and dies in there.

It's not nice, but I'm not nice.

"I wanted to speak to you," she murmurs. "Alone."

Lachlan grunts beside me, but he doesn't say anything immediately. I can tell he feels the same as I do. He's not saying anything to upset her, though. Mainly because it is not his place, this is not his home, but also because we don't know what Meri is at this point.

I'm not sure what exactly is happening here. If she's possessed or consumed. But I know this woman standing in front of me is not the one I married. She has clearly been taken over in some way.

"You may speak to me in front of King Lachlan," I state.

Her gaze flicks to Lachlan. She frowns for a split second, then rights herself before she brings her attention back to meet mine. She moves even closer, lifting her hand as she places her palm in the center of my chest before she tips her head back slightly.

"I think I could be with child," she exhales.

My heart stops beating. I stop breathing. Staring at her, I'm unsure of what to do or say in this moment. She did not just say what she did... did she?

Pressing my lips together, I plant my feet wide and cross my arms over my chest as I dip my chin and stare down my

nose at her. I must have misheard her. Her words must be a mistake. There is simply no way she just said what I think she did.

Lachlan lets out a growl beside me. Shifting my gaze to him, I can see just from his profile that he, too, does not believe her words. However, I cannot dismiss it completely, as it could be the truth. We only lay together once, but I know that is all it would take.

Although, I don't believe this is the case.

In my opinion, this is a distraction tactic by the underworld.

It's clear that Meri has changed, though only subtly, yet I know that the woman behind those eyes staring back at me is not the woman I was married to for just a few short hours. This is Meri's shell, but she is being used by the underworld in an attempt to keep me from finding Helmi.

Lifting my hand, I curl my fingers around her wrist and stare into her eyes, wondering if she could put me under some sort of tranced spell. If Meri is a shell for the underworld and its attempt to take over this part of the earth, then this would be a good place to start, but the opportunity disappears when we're interrupted.

"If that's the case, then we must send for the doctor," Neòil calls out.

Shifting my attention over Meri's shoulder, I watch as she moves toward us. I smile at the sight of Neòil. She is not Helmi, but this woman reminds me so much of her that it is a joy to know her and be around her. It also makes me realize how much I miss Helmi. I had not grasped how much I had fallen for the woman, not until she was taken from me.

"We must," I murmur, shaking myself out of the thoughts of Helmi as I agree with her.

Keeping my eyes on Meri, I watch as her gaze widens, and for a moment, a flicker of fear crosses her face. She lies. This is not a woman who is with child. This is not a truthful woman at all. She is scared of being found out.

“No,” she shouts. “*No!*”

“Yes,” I say, my lips curved up to a smile. “Indeed.”

I cannot contain myself. It is clear she is lying and thinks she’s going to get away with it. I will not allow it. No matter what she believes she can get past me—she will not succeed.

There is a moment of silence where none of us speak. I stare at her for a moment, then flick my gaze to Neòil. I watch as she moves toward Lachlan. He takes her hand in his and pulls her close. It makes me think of my Helmi again, causing me to miss her greatly. Though it also confuses me, as I have not known her for very long, it is now even clearer to me that she is my destiny.

Frowning, I clear my throat. “Do you know where Helmi is?” I ask Meri.

Her eyes widen, but she doesn’t answer me. They shift down to her feet, then slowly lift to meet mine. She’s changed. Those dead eyes of hers are filled with something else. Something that I have not seen since she returned.

Hate.

HELMI

THE DAYS PASS, ONE BY ONE, AND I WONDER IF KARO MISSES me at all. I’m lonely, but beyond that, I’m sad. Letting out a heavy sigh, I stare out of the window, hoping for any signs of life. A bird, a deer, a man, anyone or anything, but there is nothing. There has been nothing, and there will probably be nothing.

The door opens behind me, but I know it is the witch. That’s what I’ve decided to call her. I refuse to use the name she gave me. Johanna. It’s too pretty for the likes of her. So, in my head, I call her Witch.

She stopped just appearing in my room a few days ago. I don’t know why, but now she uses the door. My stomach cramps and twists as she approaches. She stands behind me. I

can sense her presence, but I don't turn around to look at her. She deserves none of my attention.

"I have found your dear, sweet brother," she coos.

My heart stops.

My breath stops.

Spinning around, I lean back and grab hold of the window's ledge in an attempt to steady myself so I do not fall out and onto the ground below. Johanna has a smile on her face, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"What is the catch?" I ask once I take in her pure, gleaming joy, knowing that nothing good could make her smile the way she is right now.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I try my hardest not to look excited, expectant, or give her any emotion at all, but I'm sure I fail because she continues to look more and more thrilled as she presses her lips together.

"There is no catch, sweet Queen. I must admit that it has hurt to see you so saddened and alone in this tower. Much more than I thought it would."

I believe absolutely nothing of what she's just said to me. This is a trick and, at the very least, part of a bigger game. I decide to play along because maybe she can bring Nilo here to be with me. He and I can figure out the rest together. Getting him here would be amazing, though.

"Could you bring him here?" I ask, trying to sound as innocent and sweet as possible.

I'm not sure it works. It doesn't matter, though. This isn't real. She will do something, promise something, then she will make sure to take it away. She'll torture me with it. I know it. This isn't going to happen, and that's what I tell myself over and over.

"I can indeed," she purrs.

"But?" I ask, knowing there is, without a doubt, a *but*.

She takes another step toward me, and another, until she is so close I can smell her soap. Holding my breath, I stare at her and wait for her to continue with her *but*, whatever that may be.

“You will need to give me the babe.”

I almost laugh in her face. If I weren't so terrified of what she just said to me, I think I might. Instead, I stare at her, my eyes wide and my lips parted in shock. She smiles, leaning forward a little more, her face just inches from me as her gaze searches mine.

“This child is the key to everything. All the children are. You promise me just the firstborn. You make this deal. Then Nilo can come here, and you can go back home to your husband, something that I believe you will want to do... and soon.”

“Why?” I exhale.

“Meri is back at your home, and it is very clear she wishes to have your husband back for herself. Considering she is his legal wife, it will likely not be hard to do.”

Her words cause me to pause. I'm not sure what to say. What can I say? The pulsing ache that seems to spread throughout my entire body is all I can think about. I want to curl into a ball and cry right now.

The thought of Karo and Meri. The idea that he wouldn't want me anymore. The idea of them having a family. It's too much to bear. I was brought to this whole other world. I was given this idea, this life, this man, and it was supposed to be both of our destinies.

We were supposed to live happily ever after.

How can this happen? How can this be happening? I don't understand any of this, and as my body aches, my head starts to spin, and then everything goes black.

Darkness consumes me, and in that darkness, I finally feel at ease for a moment. But only for a moment. Before I am able to get comfortable, Johanna the witch is standing in front of

me. Her disapproving gaze lands on me before her lips curve up into a wicked smile.

“Agree to give me the babe, and your world will be beautiful again, Helmi. Do this, and all will be forgotten.”

I don't understand what she's saying. Even if I went back to Karo today, he would still have Meri there. They would be... whatever they are. Nothing would be immediately fixed. And if he wanted her, he would keep her. She is his legal wife, and if he wants her, that is who he will have.

“I will fix it all, Helmi,” she purrs. “You do this, and I will ensure that you have everything your heart desires. Every single thing. A husband, your brother, a family.”

“But you want my baby,” I say.

My voice sounds odd even to myself. It echoes as if it's far away, a whisper that floats around us but doesn't quite reach your ears the way speaking directly to someone would. She takes half a step toward me but then stops.

“Just the firstborn. Just the one. Your life is your own after you give him to me.”

“Never,” I hiss. “Not ever.”

“So be it.”

Her words come just as a crack of thunder fills my ears, and then there's darkness again... and silence.

Chapter Twenty

KARO

MERI'S LIPS CURVE UP INTO A SMILE. THE HATE HAS disappeared from her eyes, and she moves toward me. This will not bode well for her, as I already believe she was, without a doubt, taken over and is possessed by a demon of the underworld.

I motion for Timo, who is not too far away, as he is never too far from my side. He hurries over just as I reach for my sword and lift it, pressing the tip against the center of her chest.

She cries out, though I know I have not hurt her. Pressing my lips together, I try to hide my smile, as she is being awfully dramatic. "Karo, what has happened? I am your wife." Her last four words are said on a shrill scream, and I know this is for the others' benefit and not my own.

When Timo approaches, I jerk my chin in his direction. "Take her to the queen's chamber and lock her inside," I order.

Lachlan chuckles behind me, and I hear Neòil gasp, but I do not break eye contact with Meri. Her gaze doesn't waver. She doesn't even blink. She stares at me. I know she's trying to tell me something... or convince me of something. Perhaps she's trying to actually possess me. I'm unsure, and I do not wish to find out.

Timo thankfully holds both of her hands behind her back and drags her away. She doesn't break eye contact the entire time she is being forced back into the castle. There is a moment of silence before Lachlan clears his throat and speaks.

"That woman is not right," he states.

Turning around to face him and Neòil, I let out a chuckle. "I believe she has been taken over by the underworld."

"I believe you are correct," he murmurs.

"What do we do?" Neòil asks.

My attention shifts to her. She is the one who is supposed to be one-third of the women who save us.

"When will the king and queen of Katrauina arrive?" I ask.

Neòil and Lachlan share a glance, then shift their attention back to me. "Soon, hopefully. It's been a few weeks, they are already near," Lachlan says.

"The dragon?" I ask.

Neòil shakes her head slowly. "I was unable to locate him. I think the underworld has suppressed our communication."

"I must talk to the witches. Where is yours?"

Neòil lets out a sigh. "I've tried to contact her as well. I have been able to do so in the past, but I cannot. I am concerned. I believe this is all connected."

She is likely correct, which is also why nobody can find Helmi. This island is not too large. There should be news of her somewhere, a sighting of some kind. That is, unless she's been hidden, not just in a dungeon of some kind but instead by magic... *dark magic*.

"This is concerning," I murmur.

Together, the three of us make our way back to the castle in silence. Nobody speaks, and I move straight toward my personal chambers, sending a maid for some refreshments and another to tell Anja and Ilta to join us.

The wedding has taken place, the bride and groom are gone, and now we must focus on the task at hand. Ilta presses her lips together, standing beside the window as she watches me. Sinking down in the chair at the small table, I let out a sigh.

“Something plagues your mind,” I call out.

Lachlan grunts beside me, and Neòil moans as she sits as well. She’s heavily pregnant, and it’s clear she wishes this to be over. I do not blame her, but at the same time, it would be nice to have this concluded before the baby’s arrival.

Especially if the underworld is going to be coming at all of us from every corner.

“It does,” Ilta says. “They’ve been able to cut all communications. They’ve been able to isolate us on this already isolated island. They’ve taken Helmi and hidden her away. There is something happening. They are working.”

“Indeed,” Lachlan murmurs.

“You cannot find her anywhere?” I ask.

She presses her lips together, then pushes off the wall and moves closer toward me, stopping directly in front of me. I tilt my head back slightly, looking up at her. She lifts her hand, her palm touching the center of my chest, and closes her eyes tightly. Then I feel something inside of me tingle.

It consumes me.

And then my eyes open and I suck in a deep breath before I let it out slowly. “What has happened?” I ask.

“I was trying to use my magic, what little I have left right now,” she says. “Helmi is still in the country. I don’t know where, but she is here. I can feel her...” Ilta pauses, and I stare at her, unsure of what to do, what to say, and whether I should be running through the countryside to look for my bride. Then she continues. “She is alive. She is hidden, but she is alive.”

“Can you find her?” I ask.

Ilta shakes her head slowly. “I cannot. My magic is still too weak, but it is growing. I can feel it working inside of me.”

Standing, I walk over to the window and peer out at the ocean. It rolls in and out. Its bright waters are unmarred. Not a single boat or anything to block or obstruct my view. I wish there were a ship out there, one from Katrauina, carrying the king and queen.

I'm unsure of what to do. I'm without my bride. I have a woman here who's possessed by a demon from the underworld. And all communication has ceased. This cannot be good. This cannot be right.

HELMI

WHEN I AWAKE, IT'S WITH A START AND A POUNDING HEAD. I don't know what she did to me, but Johanna did something, and it hurts. Not just my head, either. My body aches as well. Pushing myself to sitting, I lean my back against the side of the bed with a grunt.

My body hurts from lying on the floor. I'm not sure how long I was down there, but it has to have been hours because it was daylight when I was last awake and now it is pitch black in the space. Not even a torch is lit for me.

It doesn't matter. I should stay right here in the darkness until I die. Because it seems like that's what is going to happen to me. I won't freely give Johanna my baby. I wouldn't, even if it was for some noble cause. But I especially won't if it has to do with some crazy taking over of the world.

She will have to kill me before she can have this child, and as much of a threat as it is, I have a feeling she wouldn't even bat an eyelash at doing just that. So, as I stare at the darkness in front of me, I wonder where Karo is and if he is even thinking of me.

It's silly.

I know it is.

But the fact is that I don't know. He seems to be into me for the sheer fact that I'm his destiny and not because of who I am as a person. Then a thought slams into me. What if some

god or someone has talked him into a completely different destiny?

He was so quick to believe that it was me. That it was us. What if he's been told a different story and he isn't even looking for me? If I'm here until this baby is born, it won't matter what I want. Johanna is going to take whatever she wishes.

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I pinch my eyes closed and try not to cry. I'm not sure how long I stay seated on the floor, but when my legs begin to fall asleep, I force myself to stand and climb onto the bed.

Lying down on my side, I place my hand against my belly and close my eyes. I've been wishing so hard to be freed that I haven't really thought of much else. Tonight, I decide to wish for something else.

Tonight, I wish for Karo to come to me. Even if it's just in a dream. I just want to hear his voice. I want to be able to tell him that I didn't run, that I was taken. I want to know that he is looking for me, that he misses me, that he still wants me.

But above all of that, I want to tell him about this baby and that Johanna is going to try and keep it to do whatever it is some underworld person could do with a baby. I'm so confused. I don't know what to think anymore.

I'm stuck here, and I literally have no way out.

Not unless I jump from the window of the tower that I'm locked inside.

I'm not sure how long I lie on the bed in the dark room, but my eyes are closed as I attempt to force myself to sleep. I'm not sure if it works or if eventually, I become stuck in that half-awake, half-dream state.

"Helmi," a deep voice calls.

It's him.

I see Karo standing in front of me, and I try to lift my arm so I can touch him, but nothing moves.

"Where are you?"

I can't speak. I try to think of the words I want to say, but nothing comes out. I'm frozen, my mind working, but nothing else happening. He frowns, moving forward, but it doesn't feel like he's getting any closer to me. In fact, it's almost as if he is in the same place, which is in the near distance.

"Stay strong, *rakas*. I will come for you. I will find a way. Do not give in to any evil. Stay strong."

His body begins to fade away, and my entire body jolts as I sit straight up. The room is a dusty-blue color as the sun begins to rise and spill light into the space. My heart slams against my chest, my lips are dry, and as I glance around the room, I look for him.

In my mind, I know he's not there, but in my heart, I wish he were. Throwing the blanket off my legs, I stand and hurry over to the window. I don't know what I expect to see, but I hope it's Karo.

Greenery meets my eyes, along with clear skies and bright pink flowers. There is nobody. Nothing. Everything is exactly the way it was when the sun set yesterday. My heart sinks. He is not going to come for me. He is not going to find me. I couldn't even speak to him in my dreams, so how can I expect him to figure out where I am?

Taking a step backward, I let out a heavy sigh and turn around to face the door. I wish I could close my eyes and will it to open. I wish I could fly out of the window. I wish. I wish. I wish. But I can't do any of those things.

Because they aren't possible even in this magical world.

Frowning, I spin around again, march to the window, and peer down to look at the ground below me. It looks green and lush, but from this height, I know it would kill me if I jumped.

Reaching out, I feel the wind touch my fingertips, and I let out a muffled cry. "Please, Karo. Find me," I whimper. "Whatever it takes, find me. I love you."

And those words, I hadn't intended to speak them, but they are the truth. I do love him. I think I fell for him almost instantly. After the fear and anger subsided. When he caressed

my cheek. When he called me his beloved. When he gently held me close.

I fell for him then.

And afterward, I was taken away.

Chapter Twenty-One

KARO

I DON'T SLEEP. I'M NOT SURE IF I WILL SLEEP AGAIN, AT LEAST not until I have Helmi home with me. Then perhaps I can rest if we have defeated the underworld. Standing at my window, I stare out at the ocean and wonder if she is indeed seeing the same thing I am in this moment.

There is a knock on the door that startles me. Calling out to whoever it is, I turn to watch Neòil slip inside. Arching a brow, I bend slightly to see Lachlan come in behind her, but he doesn't. She closes the door behind her and moves just a few steps into the room.

It's not my actual bedchamber, but it is still unseemly for two people of the opposite sex to be alone in a room together, especially two married people. Although I know nothing would ever happen, and judging by the complete fear in her gaze, she is not here for anything nefarious.

"Neòil," I greet, breaking the silence. "What has happened?"

She swallows loudly, then shakes her head slowly and takes one more half step toward me before she stops.

"I had a vision last night," she whispers.

It's clear to me she's scared to death. This vision was not a good one. I take a step toward her, then stop. Tipping my chin

down slightly, I look into her eyes as I wait for her to tell me what has happened, though I feel as if I'm impatiently waiting.

“Neòil,” I gently nudge.

She nods her head, shakes it once, then nods again before she inhales a deep breath, holds it for a moment, then lets it out slowly. Finally, she speaks, and when she does, my stomach twists.

“Meri came to me. At first, I thought it was Helmi. When I reached out to hug her, she frowned, and I saw her eyes. It was then I knew it was Meri. She told me she would come for the baby as soon as I delivered him.”

My heart begins to slam against my chest. “She laughed at me when I told her she would never come near my baby. Then she said that Soleil and Helmi would have their babies taken as well. It was her job to collect him. Helmi is with her collector, and the next collector would come for Soleil's. They want the first boys.”

“The heirs,” I rasp. “It's not us. It's the heirs they are after,” I continue, my mind working hard as I think about what is happening and the way it is happening. “You women are from a completely different world. You're all here at the same time, you're married to the only men who are involved in these curses, and you're with child. At least two of you are.”

“Karo,” she whispers. “Karo.”

I've got my neck bent, my hand wrapped around the back as I think about everything and the way it is unfolding before me. Lifting my gaze, I watch her and tilt my head to the side.

“Neòil?”

“Helmi is with child,” she whispers. “They have what they want. They have her, Meri is here with me, and Soleil is on her way. We will all be here, pregnant with heirs.”

“No,” I bark. “Absolutely not.”

“How will you stop this? They have Helmi,” she whispers. “The witches have either lost all of their power or have had their communications completely cut off. They are essentially

useless. I believe even mine are. Even when they get here, I'm not sure they can help us in any way."

She is right. I'm not sure they can help either. Not if they don't have any powers. The underworld is trying its hardest to ensure that the women are defenseless. And they don't know how to use their power. If they even have any.

I'm sure they do.

"We need to gather Ilta, Anja, and Lachlan. Your vision was a warning. Meri, maybe deep down, her soul is still there, trying to help us. Either way, we must try to find out where Helmi is and figure out a way to protect you."

"I'm scared, Karo. I think the underworld has finally come to enact its revenge or take over or whatever. I have a little magic, but I can't control it, and as far as I know, Soleil is the same way."

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I dip my chin and move toward the door. Pulling it open, I stand aside to let her pass. She is worrying her hands in front of her belly, and I try to give her a smile, but I'm sure she can tell it's completely fake.

I wait for her to pass me before I follow behind her. "To the breakfast room. We should all eat something."

Personally, I could go without eating anything at all. But I know Neòil needs sustenance. She's feeding a new life, and she is going to need her strength, not only for that but for what is to come as well.

Once we're in the dining area, I turn my head and look over my shoulder at Timo. "Can you please bring Ilta, Anja, and Lachlan? We have much to discuss."

Timo dips his chin, then spins on his heels and moves out of the room and toward the living quarters. Walking past Neòil, who is seated in the chair that has been hers since she arrived, I make my way toward the swinging door that leads to the kitchen.

It isn't often that I reach out personally to the kitchen staff. Not that I am opposed to it, but it is rarely a need. The staff

here takes care of their king well, and before I even realize I need something, it's likely already provided.

As soon as I step into the warm kitchen, everything stops. The head cook slowly turns around to face me, her face ashen as if she believes she's done something wrong. Forcing myself to smile, I dip my chin in a single nod before I make my way toward her.

"I understand that breaking the fast has come and gone, but is there a possibility for a second round for five?" I ask.

Her eyes soften, and she takes a step toward me. She lifts her hand, her fingers curling around my bicep, something that is not a normal action by a cook to her king, but I do not mind it much, as this cook gave me treats of bread dough as a small child.

"Yes, Karo. A fast to break for five is acceptable. We will have it out momentarily, but please, tell me that you are well."

"Cook?" I ask.

She smiles, her head tilting to the side as her gaze searches mine. "Your bride is missing. Do not assume that I believe that woman up there is your bride."

My lips twitch into a small smile. "You know?" I ask.

She hums. "A woman knows these things. That woman is not your bride. She was your bride, but she is not any longer. Helmi is your bride. I quite like her."

"I will get her back."

She nods her head. "Sure. Good. And we will look forward to that day. Go and sit. The food will be out soon."

Thanking her, I take a step backward before I turn around and walk back toward the door, where I stop, turn my head, and look over my shoulder at her. "Cook?" I call out. She lifts her head, a smile on her lips. "Helmi is my destiny. I must get her home."

"You will, Karo."

Leaving her to the cooking, I make my way back into the breakfast room, where everyone has gathered. Finding Timo's eyes, I jerk my chin. "Sit with us, Timo. We have much to discuss."

HELMI

I'M NOT SURE HOW LONG I STARE AT THE ROLLING GREEN hills. There is nothing else for me to do here other than stare out at the green and hot-pink colors that consume the ground in front of me. I want to feel that grass beneath my bare feet. I don't know if I ever will again, and that makes me feel sad.

The door swings open, slamming against the wall of the room. Turning around slightly, I watch as Johanna swoops inside. She stops just a few feet from me, wearing an evil, maniacal smile.

"Have you decided to give me your babe yet?" she asks.

Her voice is a deep purr, and I hold my breath as I watch her. I'm not sure what to do, but I do know I will not be giving her permission to take my baby. Hell to the no. I would rather live in the woods, alone, cold, and desperate, but I'd have my baby with me.

"Never," I grind out. "Not ever."

"That is your final decision?"

I almost laugh in her face. Is she for real? "Yes, that is my final decision," I snap.

There is a moment of silence where we stare at one another. I expect her head to spin and for her to start puking green fluid at me. But she doesn't. Instead, she tilts her head to the side. Her smile doesn't fade, and she takes a few floaty steps toward me.

"That thing inside of you is mine, whether you want to give it to me or not."

"Never," I grind out.

She laughs, her cackle filling the space and bouncing off the stone walls. I consider trying to run past her but decide against it. This baby inside of me needs to stay right where it is, and all I can do right now is protect it with my life. Running past this crazy witchy bitch is not the way to do that.

“Then stay in here with your bread and water until the day you pop that demon out. It will be mine.”

She vanishes before my eyes, and the door slams and locks in the next second. Instead of sinking down to my ass and crying, I decide to turn back toward the window. Placing my hand on my belly, I stare at the rolling hills again for a moment before I close my eyes and think of Karo.

“Save me, my husband,” I whisper to myself, then begin to chant those words over and over.

It has to work. Neòil said I had some kind of magic inside of me. She said she had it inside of her and Soleil too. I just have to find it. Maybe I just have to want to be with Karo enough to make it happen.

Lifting my hands, I lace my fingers together, tipping my head, and I chant to myself over and over. “Take me to Karo. Take me to Karo. Take me home. Take me to Karo.”

Opening my eyes, I expect to be back in Karo’s and my bedroom. I’m not there. I’m still in this stupid tower. If I never see another circular turret building, it would be too damn soon. This is a damn nightmare.

Every single moment of this is a nightmare.

A tear forms in my eye and slowly rolls down my cheek. When it lands on the stone windowsill, I hear a horse neigh. My chin jerks, and I see a man on a horse nearby. He’s close enough that I could probably scream and get his attention.

I don’t do that, even though that’s exactly what I want to do right now. Instead, I lean out as far as I can without falling and wave. I do anything and everything I can to get his attention.

He stops and tips his head back, his eyes finding mine, and for the first time since waking up here weeks ago, I finally

feel... *relief*.

Chapter Twenty-Two

KARO

“GO TO YOUR CLYDESDALE,” ILTA MURMURS AS WE FINISH eating our breakfast.

She’s heard Neòil’s story of her vision. Although, as she told the story, my focus was on Lachlan, who made it very clear by the scowl on his face and the matching clenched fist and jaw that he was not happy about any of this and he believes, as well as I do, that this vision is a foreboding and not just some nonsense of a dream.

“My Clydesdale?” I ask.

I’m confused. Pressing my lips together, I frown as I watch her from across the table. There is a moment of silence as she watches me, then she stands to her feet before she turns and makes her way to the cart that holds a pitcher of water. She pours a goblet. I can’t look away from her. Her mind is working, although I cannot guess what she is thinking.

“Yes,” she finally murmurs. “Take the Clydesdale. I will try to transfer what knowledge I can to the beast. Hopefully, the rest he will feel himself.”

I am confused. Although, I do not say this. Instead, I stand and dip my chin in one single move. “Then off to the horse I go,” I state.

Lachlan chuckles, but I hear his chair move. I walk out of the room, make my way toward the door, and, without

stopping, continue toward the horse barn. It's empty save for my Clydesdale and a few others milling around. I don't know where the staff is, but it does not matter.

Timo brushes past me, making his way straight toward my horse, then begins to ready him for a ride. Lachlan moves toward a paddock, and I watch him as he gathers another horse, readying him as well.

"Lachlan?" I ask.

He snorts. "You don't think I'll just be letting you run off alone, now do you?"

"Well... I did..." I say, my words trailing off.

Lachlan chuckles. "Runo would not allow it, and neither will Neòil."

"That's absolutely correct," Neòil announces as she walks up to her husband's side. I watch as she places her hand on his forearm, her gaze finding mine. "I will be joining as well."

I open my mouth to tell her no, but I don't need to because Lachlan does it first. "No," he snaps.

Her lips curve up into a small smile, and she shakes her head back and forth twice before she leans a bit closer to him, rising to her toes to get her lips just below his ear. I don't hear what she says, but whatever it is, Lachlan's gaze lifts to the ceiling as an expression of exasperation crosses his face. I can't help but let out a chuckle.

"You ride in front of me, wife," he grinds out.

Timo brings the saddled Clydesdale to me, and I dip my chin, murmuring a "thanks" before I mount the beast. I dip my chin, my gaze finding Ilta's. She's watching me, her brows snapped together in what I can only assume is concentration or perhaps even confusion.

"Ilta?" I ask.

She shakes her head a couple of times, moving toward me, and places her hand on the side of the horse's neck. In silence, she closes her eyes and leans against the animal. I watch her,

my chin dipped as I wait for her to finish whatever it is she's doing.

She lifts her head, takes a step back, and eventually drops her hand from the beast, her eyes finding mine. Her gaze holds my own as a slow smile plays on her lips. "The horse has everything I can give him. He can take you in the general direction. That is all I know. If I am able to discover anything else, I will find a way to let you know."

"Thanks to you, *noita*," I rasp.

Her smile widens a bit more. "I will stay here and try my hardest to keep Meri and whatever possesses her at bay. Go and get your queen. Rescue her so that we may end this."

Dipping my chin, I turn my head and look over my shoulder at Neòil, who is astride a horse, Lachlan behind her, one arm wrapped around her waist, the other holding the reins. He jerks his chin in my direction, and I click my tongue in a demand for my Clydesdale to move.

Thankfully, he does. I'm unsure of where we're going exactly, but he is on a mission, and he is focused. Lachlan and Neòil catch up to me quickly and ride beside my Clydesdale. We ride in silence for what feels like several hours.

"I did not realize your country was so large," Lachlan calls out. "I thought it much smaller than this."

I laugh, turning to look at him. It's not as if I need to guide the horse anywhere. He's on his own mission. "I did not either. We'll be running out of room soon."

"By the gods," Lachlan responds.

Shifting my attention away from him, I follow the direction he's looking, and my eyes widen as much as his. I have never seen this building in all my life. I have spent my lifetime scouring this country, finding hidden gems, uncovering all the things present here because, as a prince, it is almost a rite of passage.

I know that this is not anything I have ever seen before. Therefore, my initial reaction is that it must be magic. I would know if something of this size were erected in my country.

News would reach me in one form or another. People are not quiet when it comes to anything exciting, and this tower would be considered exciting.

“This is not by the gods,” I murmur. “This is by the underworld.”

“Keep Neòil away,” I grind out. “I will come back when my mission is complete, and I have Helmi.”

Lachlan opens his mouth, but I only shake my head. “They cannot be near one another. If the underworld is there, then both women together? They will just need the third to be successful.”

“I cannot let you go alone,” he murmurs.

Looking over my shoulder, I click my tongue. “Stay here. I am not alone. Helmi is there, and I have my sword.”

Turning back toward the tower, I ride. I don’t have to look behind me to ensure that Lachlan and Neòil stay back. He will protect her. He would not put her in danger, and perhaps she can help from where she is. I know not how protected this tower is.

Riding up to the building, I tilt my head back and look up at the single window at the top. Then I see her. She tips her head down, her long blonde braid falling out of the window and down the side of the stone building.

As I smile up at her, I feel a sense of relief just at the sight of her there. I wish her hair were long enough so I could use it as a rope and climb up the tower to reach her. Jerking the reins, I go in search of the door. I will get to my woman. I will rescue her.

And I will bring her home.

HELMI

HE WILL NEVER MAKE IT UP HERE. MY INSTANT HOPE IS dashed because not only is this place surrounded, but it is also infused with magic. Turning my back to the window, I stare at the door, wondering if he will make his way inside. He has to

get in through the main entrance first, then climb the stairs before he can find his way to me.

I pinch my eyes closed. I don't know what I'm doing, but I send good luck, hopes, wishes, prayers, whatever I can his way. I don't know if I'll ever have any magic. Although, it's been said that I'd need it to defeat this underworld, and if there was ever a time for it to make itself known... now would be it.

Lifting my hands, I flex my palms as they face the door. I place my feet shoulder-width apart, my legs widening as I bend my knees slightly and brace for whatever is to come. Nothing comes.

“Please work, magic. Please help Karo.”

Tears roll down my cheeks as I hope, wish, and pray for the magic to flow through me. It doesn't. My knees give out, and I sink down to the floor. They slam against the hard stone floor with a thud, and my body shudders with trembling cries.

I don't know what to do.

I'm stuck in this hell, in this tower.

I can't get out.

I can't help Karo.

I'm helpless, worthless, pointless.

If all he wanted was a woman to carry his child, he made the wrong choice. He should have kept his original bride because I can't even do that right. Placing my hands in my lap, I hang my head and cry.

There's nothing else I can do.

KARO

THE DOOR TO THE TOWER, THE ONLY DOOR I CAN SEE WITH THE naked eye, is indeed locked. However, that does not surprise me at all. Taking my sword from my scabbard, I raise it above my head and attempt to cut the lock.

It does not work.

If I thought the door was fragile enough, I would lift my foot and kick the idiotic thing down. However, it is sturdy. I would probably knock myself on my backside if anything at all. Lifting my arms again, I attempt to break the lock a second time.

Nothing happens.

There is laughter in the background.

Taking a step backward, I look around for the source of the noise. It is nowhere to be seen. If I were to guess, I would assume the evil underworld creature inside is indeed laughing at me and my predicament.

The door slowly opens.

I am excited enough that the first thing I want to do is run inside. However, at the same time, I am wise enough from years of battle to know that this is a trick of some kind. Clenching my jaw, I grind my teeth slowly as I stare at the empty doorway.

“Do you not wish to come in and valiantly save your queen?”

The voice is taunting and female, but I know these underworld goblins will do anything to subdue their victims. Instead of walking brazenly through the doorway, I stay where I am, my sword loosely held in my hand, ready for battle.

“I do. However, I am aware of your trickery. I shall stay here. Show me your face.”

There is a moment of silence before she appears. She is beautiful, as they always are. Her looks are to appeal to whomever she comes across. A man, sexually. A woman, as a beautiful, untouchable being. Always appealing. So, it does not surprise me that she is indeed tempting and pleasing to the eye.

She is not my queen.

She stands between me and my queen.

Therefore, no matter how appealing she is, she must die.

Chapter Twenty-Three

HELMI

I HEAR HIS SHOUT. HIS CRY. THEN THERE IS METAL CLANGING, and I decide to try the door. Perhaps it's not locked. Standing up, I rush toward the handle and wrap my fingers around the door in an attempt to pull it open.

Nothing happens.

I try again.

Nothing.

Lifting my hands and balling my fingers into fists, I slam them down on the hard wooden door with a shout of frustration. I do it again, and again, and then again. On the fifth time, the door opens inward.

Stumbling backward, I gasp at the sight. I expect to see Johanna on the other side with some victorious smirk on her face, but there is nobody there. For a moment, I think of staying where I am, too afraid to step out into the hallway again, but I decide against it.

If Karo can come here to try to save me, then I can do a little saving of myself. Forcing myself to take a step forward and another, I eventually make my way into the dark hallway. The sound of the metal striking metal does not stop.

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I take a step toward the sound, then another. The staircase waits for me. Slowly, I

descend, one step after the other, round and round, until I reach the bottom.

The circular foyer is brighter than it was the last time I was here, the door wide open, and I inhale a deep breath of fresh air as I move toward that open door just as I hear a bloodcurdling scream.

That scream belongs to Johanna. She is running toward Karo with a sword in her hand. I don't know where it came from. I've never seen her with a weapon before this. And it startles me.

Without a second to spare, Karo slices his sword through the air, and I watch as Johanna's head is sliced clean off. Blood spurts everywhere, all over his face and torso. I should feel badly, scared, or something other than relief at the sight of her dead body dropping to the ground.

Standing frozen in my spot, I don't move. I can't. Karo lifts his gaze to meet mine, his chest moving up and down with his panting breath. Then he takes a step toward me. He's completely covered in blood, his entire face, his hair, his whole body, but he's never looked more beautiful to me.

Karo only takes one step before he stops, his sword at his side, his eyes focused on mine. He doesn't say the words, but I know he's allowing me to make the next move. Whatever that may be, whatever I wish for it to be.

I take a step toward him, then another, until I am but a few inches from his body. I can feel his heat, smell his breath, and practically feel his touch. Lifting my hand, I hold my fingers close to his cheek, but I do not touch the bloodstained skin.

"My wife," he rasps.

"Am I that?" I ask on a whisper.

There is a moment of silence as we stare at one another. No words are spoken. None need to be. At least not yet, anyway. He wraps his fingers around my wrist before he turns his head and touches his lips to the middle of my palm.

"I have found you, My Queen," he murmurs.

“You have,” I exhale.

“My queen in the tower.”

I am just that, too. His queen in the tower, his queen of the tower. “Yes,” I murmur. “I am your queen of the tower. How did you defeat Johanna? Wasn’t she one of the people from the underworld?” I ask.

He chuckles, shaking his head a couple of times. “She was perhaps just possessed. The underworld is notorious for taking over human bodies to use for its pleasure. Or whatever is on its agenda.”

“What happens now?”

Karo’s lips curve up into a grin. “Now we go home, my wife.”

“But the underworld? I don’t think I have any magic. What if I’m taken again? Next time, you might not be able to find me. Johanna wanted our baby, Karo.”

My words come out in a jumbled mess, and I am the one breathing heavily by the time I am finished speaking. Karo chuckles, then shakes his head once before he leans forward slightly. I feel his warm lips against mine in a brush of a kiss before he speaks, and when he does, it’s on a whisper.

“And did you promise our baby to this woman?” he asks.

“Never,” I hiss. “Not ever.”

He smiles and chuckles, then shifts his head, moving his head forward and touching his lips to mine again. There is a moment of silence, then I feel his lips move against mine as he speaks.

“That is my bride,” he murmurs. “My beautiful bride and my babe.”

He places his hand against my belly before he lifts his head, placing his forehead against mine, his breath coming out as a trembling exhale.

“My babe.”

“That’s what she said, but I’m not sure. I don’t know if it’s too early to tell. I haven’t been able to keep track of days and weeks here. It’s all been a blur.”

He hums and lifts his head. His eyes search mine, his lips twitching into a smile as they do, and he laughs softly. “You are with child, Helmi. My child. Shall we go home?”

“Yes, please.”

“Indeed,” he exhales.

He takes a step backward, his warmth leaving me, and reaches for my hand, wrapping his fingers around my wrist as he tugs me forward. I plant my feet, though, so he slowly turns to face me again, his brow arched.

“That seemed very easy,” I whisper.

He grins, shaking his head a couple of times. “It did, but it is just the beginning. Just a distraction. More will come, and we must prepare.”

KARO

ONCE HELMI IS ON THE BACK OF THE CLYDESDALE, I straddle the beast behind her. Turning my head, I look behind me at the tower. Johanna is still lying on the ground, the blood from her human body pooling around her.

I expect to see them disappear, both the blood and her body, but they don’t. If the underworld is trying to consume every part of this world, it is indeed failing. Clicking my tongue, I tug on the Clydesdale’s reins and head straight toward Lachlan and Neòil.

Thankfully, they are waiting for us. Neòil appears to be concerned. Lachlan looks extremely proud. Instead of saying anything, I ride past them. I know they will come up beside us, and just a few moments later, that is exactly where they are.

Together, the four of us ride toward the castle. As much as I want to ride straight through, after a few hours, we stop, and dismount from the horse, then reach up and wrap my fingers

around my brides waist and tug her off of the beast. Lachlan and Neòil do the same.

The women embrace, and I move toward Lachlan. “Tell me,” he demands.

He places his fists on his hips, his feet planted wide, and I can tell he is angry that he wasn’t able to go into battle with me. Biting the inside of my cheek, I move toward him. Then I stop and shake my head a couple of times.

“She was a possessed human,” I say. “It was far too easy to kill her. It makes me wonder what else they are working on.”

“Because there is simply no way this is it,” Lachlan rumbles. “No warriors, no enchantments, just you and the woman, a woman who used no powers at all to fight you? There is something amiss.”

Nodding once, I clear my throat. “I agree. Something is definitely amiss. We must get back to the castle. I’m not sure what will happen next, but I have a feeling we should stay together.”

He jerks his chin, and we gather the women. We climb back onto our horses, and with our focus on home, we ride. It doesn’t take us long to reach the castle. The sky starts to grow darker with an incoming storm the closer we get, and I have a feeling this has to do with the underworld itself.

Once we’re in the courtyard, I dismount, and the Clydesdale heads straight for the horse barn. Lachlan’s does the same. The beasts are well trained and likely know that this storm is close to hitting, so they wish to be in their safe places.

The four of us hurry inside the castle, our own safe place from the storm, surrounded by stone blocks. Ilta and Anja are in the main hall as we enter. Their gasps bounce off the walls before they run toward us and wrap their arms around Helmi.

I watch them, the women reuniting, their voices filling the space as they chatter. As I observe for a moment, my gaze searching theirs, a sense of relief washes over me. Not because we are somehow finished with this. It’s simply because I can see Helmi. Have my eyes on her. Touch her. Protect her.

Knowing that she is indeed safe, I shift my attention to Lachlan, who is taking in the women as well. He must feel my gaze on him because he slowly lifts his eyes to mine. When I jerk my chin toward my *toimisto*, he nods once, and together we move toward the room.

Closing my eyes, I inhale a deep breath before letting it out slowly, then clear my throat before opening them. I look directly at Lachlan. He nods his head a couple of times as if he's agreeing to something, or maybe he knows what I'm thinking.

"We must get to the Meri woman and figure out what is happening," Lachlan announces.

"I agree," I state. "I'm just unsure of what happens with that. I've got no magic at all, and I don't think Helmi does either. She was in that tower, but she couldn't get herself out. That witch, possessed woman, demon, whatever she was, she had a hold on her, and only when I defeated her could Helmi free herself."

"There must be more to this. I've seen Neòil use her powers, but just once. She has no control over them, not when they come, not when she can use them, not the way she uses them, nothing."

"And Soleil?" I ask, knowing they are on their way here.

"As far as I know, the same."

I open my mouth, though I'm unsure of what I'm going to say, when Anja speaks. Turning my head, I watch her as she takes only one single step into the room. Her voice is barely above a whisper, and I can hear the concern laced through every single word she says.

"There is something working. I can feel it. We need the three of them together. That is the only way this will ever come to an end. The underworld grows stronger by the minute. Ilta has been sick for two days, though she will not admit it. She is trying to be strong, but as her magic grows, something else grows inside of her. I don't know what exactly it is, but I'm worried it could be evil consumption."

Before I can respond to her words, and I believe every single one of them, Timo is at the doorway right behind her.

“The king and queen of Katrauina have arrived.”

Well, then. It seems as though we will not have to wait to have the three women together. Perhaps the gods helped me free Helmi when I did just so we could all be together, ready to fight, ready to wage war... ready to win.

Chapter Twenty-Four

HELMI

BEFORE I CAN EVEN SIT DOWN TO TAKE A BREATH, OR PERHAPS eat something that isn't bread and water, maybe take a bath, there is an announcement that the king and queen of somewhere are coming.

Immediately, with the news, I look at Neòil for some sort of sign of who this is. Her lips curve up into a smile, and she dips her chin in a nod.

"It's Soleil," she whispers. "She's one of us."

One of us.

I didn't think I would ever be part of an us, other than just my family. But I truly am here. *One of us* is one of the women from the real world, not this fantastical place where we currently reside.

Gone are all thoughts of baths and food. I want nothing more than to run out of this building and greet her with a warm hug. I don't. I stay where I am, my eyes focused on the door as I wait for her to walk through.

There is silence around me, then Ilta makes her way toward me, her eyes finding mine as she stands directly in front of me. I'm distracted by the queen's arrival. But when Ilta lifts her hands and wraps her fingers around my biceps, all of the distractions melt away.

"Ilta?" I ask.

She shakes her head slowly. “It is my fault that Meri is still in this world. I was supposed to send her away and didn’t. But I’m sick, Helmi. I won’t be able to hold on much longer. You have magic inside of you. I can feel it. I need you to reach deep down inside and find it before I go.”

“Go?” I ask, my heart racing inside of my chest.

It beats against my rib cage so hard that I’m afraid it’s going to jump out onto the floor at my feet. She gives me a small smile. It’s sad. My stomach drops. Her fingers slide down my arms before she takes my hands in her own and squeezes once before holding them firmly in her grasp.

“I cannot last much longer. The underworld is beginning to consume me, and before I’m turned, I will have to end my own life.”

“Ilta,” I cry out softly.

She smiles as tears well in her eyes. “I have lived an amazing life, Helmi. Especially the last weeks being with you. This has been the most rewarding. Helping to save this world, ensuring you have fulfilled your destiny with our king. This is more than I could have ever hoped for myself.”

“No,” I whimper. “No.”

“Yes,” she exhales.

I have to admit that she appears to be tired. So tired that she looks completely worn out physically and emotionally. I press my lips together, roll them once, then release them before I speak.

“Fight, Ilta. Fight for yourself, for Maapallo, for me.”

My words come out as a plea, which is exactly how I intend them. But she doesn’t appear as if she’s here for the fight. Instead, she gives me another sad smile and turns her head, looking over her shoulder at the door as it opens.

A woman breezes through on the arm of a man. They are definitely who we’ve been waiting for. She is a queen, and he is very much a handsome king. They appear almost unreal. They look so perfect.

When her gaze meets mine, she smiles and then hurries over to us, leaving her handsome, long-haired husband behind. Ilta shifts away from me as the queen opens her arms wide and rushes toward me.

Her arms wrap around me in a warm hug, and it's as if my entire body relaxes instantly. "Welcome to our world. I am so happy to meet you," she murmurs against my ear before she takes a step backward.

I give her the best smile I can muster, and she winks. "It's scary. I know. Oh, I'm Soleil." She grins.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Helmi," I reply, keeping my voice even, although right now, I want to shout and cry because there is another person from our world. Neòil telling me that she exists and actually meeting her are two totally different things.

This is real.

She is real.

Lachlan and Karo move through the room and head straight toward the king. They all murmur amongst one another in a language I don't quite understand. "What are they speaking?" I ask, mesmerized at how easily all three of them can converse.

"It's a form of French," Soleil murmurs. "I can only understand it because a witch put a spell on me," she explains with a laugh.

"Same here," I say with a grin.

"Ferelith helped me. She should be here soon," Neòil murmurs.

And as if her name is what she needs to appear, she walks through the door, almost floating, and I know immediately she's magic. She's full of it. Her eyes scan the room, and I will her to find Ilta and help her. When Ferelith does notice her, her brows snap together.

It's as if nobody else in the room even exists.

Ferelith makes her way over to Ilta and stops in front of her. I watch, trying not to stare but unable to do anything else. They dip their heads close to one another, resting their foreheads on each other's, then they close their eyes, and a bright yellow light surrounds them.

Anja gasps, then the light disappears and Ferelith takes a step backward. Her gaze moves around the room and connects with Neòil's. A smile plays on her lips as she dips into a small curtsy.

"My Queen," she murmurs.

"Ferelith, I missed you." Neòil laughs.

A moment later, after we've all greeted and met one another, Karo clears his throat and enters our inner circle. His eyes meet mine. He holds my gaze for just a moment before he speaks, and when he does, his tone sends a chill down my spine.

"We must go up to my private chambers immediately."

KARO

MY PRIVATE CHAMBERS HAVE NEVER LOOKED SO SMALL. They're filled with three kings, three queens, a few witches, and Timo. It's like nothing I ever thought would happen. Three countries are being brought together. Here to save the planet with three queens from another world.

"The underworld is here," I announce. "They're taking over people. You can see it behind their eyes. It is clear they are not the same person they once were."

"They tried with me. They were succeeding, but Ferelith saved me," Ilta murmurs.

"Then we must fight them," Ferelith states.

"How?" Helmi asks. "How? I don't have magic."

Ferelith takes a step toward Helmi, then stops and tilts her head to the side, her gaze searching my bride. "Oh, but you do, Helmi," she whispers. "Believe it or not, magic resides in you."

Just because you did not have it in your world, it does not mean that you don't here."

"It's true," Neòil murmurs. "I have it inside of me, but I don't have control over it."

"Me too," Soleil states.

Helmi's eyes widen as she looks around the room. Every single face in here is hopeful. "What do I do with Meri?" I ask. "It will be difficult for any of us to sleep with her here, especially since I'm convinced she's only here to take the baby or take Helmi. Either way, it's not going to happen."

When I say the word *baby*, both of the other queens place their hands on their swollen bellies. Not a single word is spoken for a long moment. I can read the pain and fear in their eyes at the idea of the babies being taken from them, and beyond pain, I feel rage at the idea.

Complete and total fury.

Nobody will take my baby, not a human, not the underworld, not a demon. Nothing can take the life that grows inside of my wife. I will fight until my last dying breath to ensure it does not happen.

"They want the heirs," Helmi murmurs. "They hold magic or something that they desire."

Shaking my head, I look down at my lap and think about those words. The babies holding magic. My baby holding magic. "No," I bark, lifting my head. "The babies hold the key to the curse. I don't think it's magic. We're all here, three and three, with three babies coming into this world. Threes. They cannot let this happen. If they do, they will be gone."

"You think they'll vanish?" Lachlan asks.

"Vanish, no. But I think it could strip their powers. Perhaps they'll turn to dust if we could be so lucky," I murmur.

Percival, who has stayed fairly quiet this whole time, stands from his seat. We all watch him as he paces the room a few times and then stops at the window. He doesn't speak immediately. He stares out the window for a long moment

before he turns completely around and lifts his gaze to meet mine.

There is a moment of silence. One long moment of silence before he jerks his chin in my direction, his eyes searching my own before he speaks.

“Soleil will have this baby within the next two weeks. Neòil is just a few weeks behind her. And you have months yet before your bundle arrives. They are safe while they are in the wombs of their mothers, but this underworld, it knows the children’s arrivals are imminent.”

“We must do something now,” I grind out.

“Indeed, we must,” Ferelith murmurs. “But we cannot do anything unless they come for us. We will have to stay on the defense, will we not?”

I don’t say anything for a long moment, then I give him a smirk. “We must draw them out, Percival.”

He chuckles. “Yes, we must. How do you propose we do that?”

It’s my turn to stand. Lifting my hand to my chin, I rub it back and forth. I don’t have to actually think of anything to do. I already know who to use to bring them out.

Meri.

Shifting my gaze over to Timo, I jerk my chin. “Meri was sent here for a reason. The woman who guarded Helmi in the tower was nothing more than a distraction. Meri was meant to come back here. She came far too easily, and she’s tried far too hard. That is who we use to gather all the information we need and to draw them out. They will come here for her. For the women. The babies. But we must do it as soon as possible.”

Ferelith nods her head once, but it is Ilta who speaks. “We must do this immediately,” she says. “The babies will be in too much danger if we wait. If they are born. I also feel protected now thanks to Ferelith, but I am not sure how long it will last.”

I hadn’t thought of that. She’s right. We must do this now.

“Well,” I call out as I stand, “there is no better time than the present.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

HELMI

THE DUNGEON.

I don't know why we're coming down here, but it smells, it's dirty, dark, and dank. I don't say any of that, though. Instead, I stand as far away as I possibly can. I don't want to be anywhere near this woman. Not only does she totally creep me out, but she looks exactly like me, which is extra creepy.

It's like looking into the mirror, staring at my reflection. Except it's an evil version because staring into her eyes makes me feel like I'm going to be sick on the floor right here and now.

I don't, though. I stand strong, even though I want to curl into a ball. Meri stares at each of us for a moment, but then her gaze finds mine and focuses on me right before her lips curve up into a smirk.

"The baby will be ours. Just give it to us willingly, and we won't have to take him," Meri grinds out.

Silence.

I can feel everyone's eyes on me, watching me, waiting for a reaction. But at the same time, I can feel Karo's rage. It fills the room, surrounding me like a living, breathing thing. He is about to go completely crazy on this woman.

I can sense it.

I move toward her, stopping directly in front of her, staying a few feet away. Nothing is said. Her smile stays on her lips, planted firmly and cockily.

“I will tell you what I told Johanna before she died,” I say, making sure to speak slowly so her twisted, demonic brain can comprehend it. “Never. Not ever will you have this baby or any other baby.” My words come out on a hiss.

She doesn’t move, but I can tell she wants to lunge toward me. She doesn’t say or do anything. She continues to stare creepily. Unspeaking. Unblinking. Then she lets out a laugh. It bounces off the stone walls all around us.

“You can give it to them now, or you can wait and have it ripped from your body while you lie dying.”

“No to that option, too,” I snap. “Absolutely not.”

“You won’t have a choice,” she hisses.

Karo has decidedly had enough of the back-and-forth. I don’t blame him. It’s a bit much. It’s clear that Meri thinks she’s got the upper hand here because she’s the one who’s been taken over by the underworld, but I don’t think she realizes just who these men are.

These are not regular men. These are kings, and they are not going to accept this about their heirs. They would die for their children while defending them. Protecting them. They will never let anyone take them, not as long as they have breath left in their lungs.

Karo takes a step forward, then another, until he’s just inches from Meri. Her smile shifts from one of cockiness to a sexual one. She believes she’s, without a doubt, winning something here. But she has no idea.

She may have had him one single night, and as much as I hate that, I know she will never have him again. He is my husband. *My* husband.

Mine.

I don’t care if that makes me seem crazy. Nobody else can hear my thoughts anyway, so I don’t care. *He’s mine.*

Mine.

Mine.

He is mine.

“Meri, what do you think you’re going to accomplish?” Karo asks, his voice smooth as silk and full of honey.

Meri’s back arches as she tries to press her chest against his. The hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention.

Jealousy runs through me.

It flows like a river.

Sucking in a breath, I hold it as I try to keep myself from completely losing my shit on this woman, although I’m not sure what I would do besides hurl some ridiculous insult at her she wouldn’t understand.

“Give the underworld the baby, Karo, and you will live. You will be powerful beyond your wildest imagination. All of you will,” she says, calling out to the other men. “There will be no stopping any of you. You will rule the world.”

“That is a lie,” Lachlan calls out. “The underworld will rule the world, and poorly, I might add.”

She frowns, pressing her lips together before she flicks her attention to him, snarling, then shifts it back to meet Karo’s. She gives him another smile, though she does not say anything immediately.

She’s thinking of her words, trying to gather her thoughts before she speaks, and when she does, her voice is so soft that I almost don’t hear every word she says. She bites the inside of her cheek, then she pouts her lips and purrs.

“Come back to me, Karo. Our babe is going to rule the world. Made of the demons, of the underworld, he will be king.”

“There it is,” he barks, taking a step backward from her. “That is what you want. That is what the underworld wants. You want our children, but most importantly, you wish for us

to breed with the possessed women of this world, chosen by the underworld.”

Meri’s lips part in surprise, though I don’t understand why she would be. It’s not as if this plan is a complicated one. It’s the same plan the gods had to keep the curse at bay. Kings breeding with the destined women. It has been happening for centuries.

“I would rather cut my dick off than breed with you,” Karo barks.

KARO

MERI OPENS HER MOUTH TO SPEAK, BUT I AM FINISHED. CALL me a rogue if you must, but I am glad I already had her. Therefore, I will never think about what it would be like to lie with her, my queen’s twin, in body but not in mind, soul, or heart. She is nothing compared to my Helmi.

I take my sword out of my scabbard and lift it in the air. Meri lets out a cackle, then begins to murmur some words beneath her breath. I do not care what they are or why she says them. I’m already covered in the blood of the last possessed woman I came across, the last one who tried to hurt my wife. This one will meet the same fate.

With one swift move, I slice my sword through the air and directly across her neck. Not a sound is made. Blood sprays all over my face yet again, and it bothers me not one bit. Nobody in the room speaks a single word as I turn around to face them.

That is, until Ferelith, Neòil’s witch, takes a step toward me. “She called for the underworld, Karo. It will come, and it has begun.”

“Good,” I state. “It is time to be done with this. For hundreds of years, our families have done what we’ve needed to do to not only appease the gods but keep the curse at bay. It ends now. It ends today. It ends with us.”

“Indeed,” Percival calls out.

“Agreed,” Lachlan barks.

I grin. Leaving her body on the ground, her head having rolled somewhere else, as a group, we make our way back up to the main floor of the castle.

I look at Helmi when we arrive in the light. She appears to be a bit upset but does not seem completely out of sorts. Glancing around at the other women, I find they are of the same disposition.

“What happens now?” Ilta asks on a whisper.

Ferelith is the one who answers, which is for the best, considering she seems to know more about this whole thing than anyone else. She takes a step forward to stand in the center of our little group.

“What happens next is unprecedented. What happens next is the underworld lets itself be known. Let us eat heartily and rest this eve because they will be here before we realize it.”

The thought of eating hearty, lying with my wife, and sleeping soundly appeals to me. So, with a jerk of my chin, I turn to Timo. He’s been standing by, watching and taking everything in. He dips his chin as soon as my eyes connect with his.

“Baths for everyone, food as well. We will all take to our rooms this eve to rest. Tomorrow begins a new day.”

Timo doesn’t verbally respond. He doesn’t need to. He nods, then turns and hurries away to deliver my orders. Turning to my fellow kings, my gaze flicks from one to the other.

“We rest this eve. Tomorrow, we will meet after we break our fast and discuss what happens next. Witches, you will join.”

Everyone dips their chins in agreement, and we all go our separate ways. I reach for Helmi’s hand, wrap my fingers around hers, and tug her behind me as we move toward the staircase. She stops at the bottom, not a single word spoken.

Turning my head, I look over my shoulder at my wife. She is frowning, her lips pressed together in a straight line before

she lets out a heavy sigh. “Helmi?” I ask when she doesn’t speak.

“Something changed when Meri died,” she whispers. Arching a brow, I turn fully to face her. Neither of us says a word. She stares at me for a long, silent moment. I wait for her, knowing she will tell me what is on her mind, and eventually, she does. “The way she looked at you, the way you looked at her, I don’t know...”

“It was nothing,” I state. “It was relief that it was done. I knew what had to happen. But I do not know what will happen next. There is much uncertainty.”

“Yes,” she exhales. “Much.”

“Come to bed, wife. Let us enjoy the evening together. I have missed you in your absence. You have a new life growing inside of you, of which I have yet to witness.”

I take a step up the staircase, she takes one behind me, and together, we make our way up to our bedchamber, where there is a tub filled with hot water waiting for us. Pulling her toward the edge of the tub, I reach for her dress and begin to disrobe her.

“This tub and water should have been ready for you earlier.”

Helmi laughs softly as she reaches for my shirt and begins to undress me. It doesn’t take long until we’re standing completely naked in front of one another.

“It should have, but it’s been a very busy afternoon,” she murmurs as she leans forward and touches her lips to the center of my chest. I wrap my fingers around the back of her head and hold her there for just a moment.

When I loosen my grip, she tilts her head back slightly, her neck arching as she looks up at me. Her lips curve up into a smile, and I realize I’m not even happy that I bedded Meri. She matters not. This woman in front of me is the only one who does in this whole world... perhaps even in hers.

“It has, but my bride deserves to be clean and calm after her ordeal. I cannot believe what has happened. I am so glad to

have you back.”

She wrinkles her nose before she speaks. “It feels like living in that tower happened a lifetime ago. Thank you for rescuing me.”

I hum, lean down, and touch my lips to hers. “Soon, this will all be nothing but a bad dream, *rakas*.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

HELMI

HIS WARM ARMS WRAP AROUND ME FROM BEHIND. NEITHER OF us speaks. There is nothing to say. We're both lost inside of our own heads, thinking of what is to come, of what's already been here, and of what it could be after it's all finished.

What happens if we don't win? It'll, without a doubt, be the end of all of us. Death is certain.

But then, I can't stop thinking about what happens if we do win, afterward when everything goes back to what is considered normal. I still don't know anything about this world, about this country, about anything in this place.

When the dust settles, will Karo still think I am his destined bride, or will he be done with me and ready to find someone from his world, someone he can relate to and fall in love with?

"You are thinking so hard, wife, that I fear you will cause your head to ache," he murmurs, his lips touching the shell of my ear.

One of his hands slides down between my legs, the other wrapping around the front of my throat as his breath wafts against my ear. Goose bumps break out all over my skin as his fingers begin to move against my center.

My eyelids flutter closed as his fingers swirl my clit then slide through my folds before two of them slip inside of me.

Turning my head slightly, I touch my lips to the side of his neck. He grunts. I can feel the vibration against my lips, and a shiver slides down my spine yet again.

My hips begin to move, meeting his touch over and over. I'm not sure what to do. My body feels as if it's on fire from the inside out. It's the most intense I've felt with him. Maybe because it's been weeks since I've felt his touch, I'm not sure.

"Karo," I sigh against his throat, the only word my lips can form at this point.

He doesn't respond with words. His fingers do the talking, and what they say sends me over the edge. I fall into an abyss of pleasure as my hips move while he continues to touch me, my body trembling beneath the cooling water. And then I become completely boneless as I whimper against his throat.

Karo chuckles, his fingers slowly gliding through my folds before he shifts them and begins to play with my breasts. The hand at my throat doesn't move. He's not gripping me tightly or anything. He's holding me loosely but firmly. His thumb slides along the underside of my jaw, and then he speaks.

"Let's go to bed, *rakas*."

I agree. Let's.

We dry one another's bodies off with the linen towels that have been left for us. Naked, we walk into the bedroom and stop in front of the roaring fire. I never know who starts these things, but there's always a fire in every room in this place.

It's warm and comforting, a constant in a place and time that doesn't have many of those. Thoughts of my brother enter my mind. Nilo. My only constant before coming here. I miss him. As I stare into the fire, I wonder if I'll ever see him again.

"After this is done, we will talk to Ferelith about getting your Nilo here," Karo murmurs.

"How did you know I was thinking about him?" I ask, turning my head to look at him.

Karo stands completely nude beside me, soaking up the same heat as I am, but we haven't spoken. At least, I didn't

think I had said a single word. Now I'm wondering if I was thinking my thoughts aloud.

"I heard your thoughts."

"What?" I exhale, spinning so my entire body faces him.

"I could hear your thoughts," he murmurs.

Frowning, I glance at the flames of the fire for a moment, then shift my attention back to him. "Have you always been able to hear my thoughts?" I ask, my heart slamming against my chest at the thought.

He chuckles, shaking his head. "No, *rakas*. Just this evening. Standing here. I think it means things are evolving. Perhaps you're coming into your magic?"

"It doesn't freak you out?" I ask. "You seem like this is totally normal when it really is not normal at all."

He shrugs a shoulder, then takes a step toward me, closing the distance between us. His arms reach out, his fingers gripping my waist as he dips his chin to look down at me. He smiles as he lowers his head so his lips touch mine.

"No, *rakas*. It doesn't worry me. It's not necessarily normal here, but there are couples with deep connections who are able to communicate this way. I see it is not done in your world."

Deep connections.

"Deep connections," he murmurs.

My eyes widen, and I pull my face away from his slightly. "You're going to need to stop doing that," I snap.

He lets out a loud bark of laughter, obviously loving this entire situation. Something that I do not love at all. In fact, the whole thing makes me feel a little sick. Karo cups my cheek, then shifts forward and touches his lips to mine again in a brief kiss.

"I cannot stop," he says. "However, I will attempt to shut it out unless I need to hear you."

I move closer to him until my breasts press against his bare chest. I can feel his hair against my nipples, and it causes my legs to weaken, just the sensation alone. My entire body is sensitive, and my heart pounds against my chest as I search his eyes.

“I would love to have Nilo here. It would mean the world to me,” I confess.

“Then I will endeavor to make this happen for you, Helmi. For your happiness means everything to me, and family is important.”

“It is,” I exhale.

He smiles as he shifts closer so his mouth touches mine, then he slips his tongue inside of me and tastes me. All thoughts of Nilo fly out of my head. All I can think about is the way he touches me, the way he makes me feel, and the fact that I am going to find my pleasure... again.

And maybe even again after that.

KARO

I SHOULD NOT BE LISTENING TO MY WIFE’S THOUGHTS AS I move inside of her, but I can’t help it. This connection we have, it’s partially because we’ve already been through so much but also because of the situation itself.

I’m not sure if anyone else has this connection, but I’m glad I have it with Helmi. She whimpers as my hips roll, grinding against her clit. Each stroke brings her closer to the edge. She’s peaking, about to fall, about to find her release again, and when she does, it’s going to be beautiful.

I don’t stop. Not only because I am on the verge of my release as well, but also because she’s screaming in her mind for me to keep going. So, I do. Harder, faster. However she wishes me to move, that’s what I do... for her. I will always try my hardest to please her in every way possible.

She cries out as her cunt clamps down around me. She squeezes me, forcing my balls to tighten and my own release

to spill inside of her.

With a roar, I fill her.

My arms shake as I try to keep them from coming out from beneath me and my body from collapsing on top of Helmi's much smaller one. Pushing off her, I roll onto my back and attempt to catch my breath as I stare up at the ceiling above me.

Once my body stops trembling, I reach over and gather Helmi in my arms, holding her against my chest.

“Did you read my mind during that?” she asks.

I could lie and tell her no, but I decide against it. “I did. But only because you were screaming. I could not shut out your demands, nor did I want to.”

Confessing that seems like it should be wrong. I agreed to not listen to her thoughts, but this is different. I want to make her feel good, and what husband would not want to please his wife?

“I would not be a good husband if I did not wish to please you, *rakas*.”

She lifts her head from my chest, resting her chin on it as she looks up at me. I slide my fingers through her hair, tugging on the ends to arch her neck slightly. Leaning closer, I touch my mouth to hers in a brief kiss, but I cannot stay away from the taste of her.

“I'm not sure how I feel.”

“*Satisfied* is the word you're looking for,” I state.

She laughs, rolling her eyes to the ceiling as I release my hold on her hair. She places her chin back down on my chest as she watches me for a moment. We stare at one another, and I can't help but wonder if this is the moment of the calm before the storm.

“Yes, satisfied is true,” she exhales. “But also waiting.”

I hum, pulling her against me even closer. She shifts her head to place her cheek against my chest as I slide my fingers

up and down her back. There is a moment of silence as we lie entangled with one another. I wish we could melt into one right now. What perfection that would be.

“I understand,” I murmur. “Waiting for the next thing to happen because we know it is inevitable at this point.”

“It is,” she whispers.

The world is about to be engulfed in war. The people have no idea it is coming, and hopefully, we can keep it from them, but the underworld cares not about anyone or anything except itself. It will not hesitate to use the people in their games.

“If this baby is a boy, what would you want to name him?” Helmi asks.

“There is no if,” I state. “That babe is indeed a boy.”

Her finger that has been tracing circles against my chest stops and she lifts to look up at me. “What do you mean?” she asks.

Smiling, I give her a wink. “The witches said that the three of you are pregnant with heirs. Which means boys.”

“Girls can’t be heirs?” she asks, her brows snapping together.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I try not to laugh too hard because this is not her world. There is no way for her to know all the traditions and facts of the way we work, especially since every country is different.

“Only boys. The firstborn son is the heir to the throne,” I explain.

She lies back down, this time rolling onto her back. I hold back the laugh at her obvious concern on the subject. A concern she does not need to have since she is pregnant with a boy, an heir.

“What happens to our daughter if we should ever have one?” she asks on a whisper.

“A good marriage match, just like Runo and Kenna,” I reply with zero hesitation. “But she would just be ours until

that day comes. Our son would always belong to the country.”

Helmi wrinkles her nose as she turns her head, rolling onto her side to look at me. I roll onto mine as well, watching her for a silent moment. She lets out a heavy sigh as her tongue peeks out to slide across her bottom lip.

“I don’t like the sound of any of that. I’m trying to keep an open mind, but I hate that,” she whispers.

“The good news in all of this?” I ask.

“Is?”

“Our heir would not have to marry some predetermined woman. When we defeat the underworld, that will no longer be a requirement.”

As I say the words aloud, I’m not even sure I believe them. It’s been this way for centuries. A predetermined woman for the king, no matter how either of them feels. A baby sent to live in a tower until it is her time to marry. A king who lives his life knowing that there is a prearranged woman for him, all choice and control taken from him.

What is the point of being a king if you cannot choose anything about your future?

I want to give that to my child and the generations after him. I want this to be done. No more curse. No more underworld.

Happiness. Peace. Calm.

That is what I desire.

Though I know it will never be that for long, with the looming curse gone, we can at least breathe a bit easier as a kingdom... as a world.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

HELMI

I ROLL OVER AND REACH FOR KARO AND I AM SURPRISED when he's there. My hand collides with his warm chest, and he lets out a grunt. Opening one eye, I smile as I slowly open the other. He's on his back, one arm over his head and bent at the elbow as he sleeps on his hand with the other by his side.

His lips twitch into a smirk before he turns his head and his eyes open to find mine. "Morning, *rakas*," he rasps, his voice sleepy and groggy.

"Morning," I exhale.

He rolls onto his side to face me, then reaches his arm out and slides the backs of his fingers down the side of my cheek. "Are you well this morning?" he asks, and I swear my entire body melts in an instant.

"I am."

"We must ready for the day. The castle is full of people, and we must prepare for what is imminent."

He says those words, but he doesn't move right away. Instead, his hand leaves my cheek and slips down to my belly. I feel his palm pressing against my skin and close my eyes at the sensation. It's not sexual, but it does feel almost otherworldly.

He leans forward to touch his lips to mine, then rolls away. I open my mouth to ask him something, although I'm not sure

what it is going to be, so I close my lips and push up to a sitting position.

As I watch Karo move around the room, I feel that foreboding, aching feeling inside of me that something is going to go very badly. And soon. It's probably just nervous energy. There's no way this is going to happen right now... is there?

It's too soon.

Wouldn't the underworld wait until we least expect it, not while we're on edge?

Right?

"*Rakas*," he calls out softly. I lift my gaze to meet his from across the room, and he gives me a smile. "Do not overly worry. Let the men do the worrying and preparing. You and your girls discuss things with the witches. What can be done on your part to prepare, yes?"

Wrinkling my nose, I decide I hate the fact he can hear my thoughts. How annoying. I can't even worry myself into a tizzy about anything without him knowing about it.

Karo lets out a burst of laughter, and I roll my eyes to the ceiling, wondering how I can go the rest of my life with this man reading my every thought.

This is going to make for some long years.

"All will be well, wife. I will send your maids in to ready you for breaking your fast."

He walks out of the room as if he wasn't listening to my inner thoughts and enjoying my freak-out about him listening to my inner thoughts. Closing my eyes, I shake my head a couple of times, but then everything is forgotten because the maids enter and begin to dress me for the day.

I don't even pay attention to what I'm wearing. It doesn't matter. It's whatever is chosen, and I don't really have the ability to pick for myself. They style my hair while they chatter amongst one another. They all step back simultaneously when they are finished.

I'm surprised at my reflection in the mirror. The entire time I've been here, my maids have kept things very simple. They've done my hair with a few braids and twists but nothing extravagant, except for today.

My hair has dozens of small braids, with jewels and pearls all throughout them, and my forehead crown thing hangs down. My makeup is dark but beautiful, and my dress is stunning. Turning to them, I frown slightly before I ask them why they've dressed me so nicely today.

It's just another day. I don't understand what's happening.

The one who is obviously the head girl takes a step forward and dips in a slight curtsy before she lifts her head, her eyes finding mine as her lips curve up into a smile before she speaks. My eyes widen with her words, something I don't expect.

"We are very happy to have you back, Queen Helmi."

"You are?" I ask.

She nods, and then another girl takes a step forward. "We are very happy," she murmurs. "We thought you were gone forever. The other one, she is not like you."

I'm not sure what to say because Meri is a horrible *but dead* woman. I don't want to speak ill of her, but she really was bad. Pressing my lips together, I try to hide my smile but fail. My lips curve up, and I even show my teeth.

"Okay, well, thank you very much. I'm super happy to be back, and I can't wait to get to know you guys better."

They exchange glances, then shift their confused attention back to me. They don't say anything. It's clear I've blown their minds with my "other universe" language, so I decide to just smile and nod. They do the same and scurry out of the room.

Following slowly behind them, I step out into the hallway and stop. Looking left, then right. There is nobody here, and for a moment, I relish that. I don't know why. I spent days by myself in that tower and wanted nothing more than to be around people.

And now that I've been back for all of one day, I want five minutes alone.

It's bizarre.

On that note, I turn toward the stairs and make my way down to the dining room. I can hear the chatter of the people surrounding the table, and I hang back, listening to them. I'm not trying to spy or even focus on the words they're saying. I'm just enjoying the sound of it all. It makes me think of my family, and I miss them instantly.

"Helmi, come and join us. The food is ready, and everyone is waiting for you," Karo calls out.

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip, I can't help but laugh at him. He was listening to me. I don't think he'll ever not listen to my thoughts. It should piss me off, but I don't think it does anymore, *especially after last night in bed.*

That was hot.

KARO

SITTING AT THE TABLE, I LOOK AROUND AT THE PEOPLE WHO surround me. They are all smart, capable, and powerful. This is a group of the unlikeliest of people, and yet, it works. I enjoy them all, men who are supposed to be enemies or allies, nothing else. Not men who are family.

There is a crack of thunder above us, and I stand to my feet along with the other kings. Timo shouts my name as he runs toward us. When he speaks, I don't understand. "The dragon is here, but so are the beasts."

"Beasts?" Lachlan asks before anyone else can speak.

"Beasts," Timo confirms. "Flying beasts."

Every single king takes a step forward and unsheathes his sword. We are ready for battle, whatever that may look like. Moving together, we make our way toward the main entrance door, then stop once we've reached the top steps of the castle.

The beasts.

It's not just any beasts.

It is half a dozen dragons.

The thunder cracks again, and then another dragon comes flying forward, except this one I recognize. He lands in front of us and looks at Neòil. It is her dragon. She rushes toward the beast and presses her forehead against his.

They must be able to communicate with one another because, in the next breath, she looks over her shoulder.

“They are from the underworld. He can fight them, but there are too many for him to succeed.”

Lachlan growls, then Percival takes a step forward. “What do we do?” he asks. “My troops won't be here for another week. I did not think this would happen so soon. I should have.”

“Troops will not matter. They will be demolished in seconds. It's better to save their lives by them not being here,” Percival murmurs.

Clearing my throat, I take a step forward. “We must figure out how to defeat them. We have my troops, the dragon, and two witches.”

“Don't count me,” Ilta calls out. I turn my head to look back at her, anger rushing through me, or rather embarrassment. She lifts her chin in the air. “If my powers are weakened again, I'm afraid the underworld will take me over. I can't take that chance, not with being so close with everyone and living in the main part of the castle.”

She's right.

The last thing we need is for one of us *in our close circle* to get possessed.

Ferelith takes a step forward. The dragons are roaring and circling around us, all except Neòil's beast. He doesn't move even an inch. He's watching them as they all show off and attempt to intimidate us.

“The women need to come with me,” Ferelith calls out.

I want to keep Helmi behind me. It's my duty to protect her, but in this case, I have no magic, and she is supposed to be one of the destined women who will save the world. She must have magic, mustn't she?

I can't do this. I can't do this. I can't do this.

Helmi's words play on repeat in her head, over and over. Taking a step toward her, I lift my hand and wrap my fingers around the side of her neck, gripping her there gently as I rest my forehead against hers.

"You can do this, *rakas*. You can and you will do this. For us, for yourself, and for this child who grows inside of you. Do not let them win, my bride."

She blinks but doesn't speak. Instead, she sucks in a deep breath, then lets it out slowly and nods her head once as I take a step away from her. The women, together, walk up to the giant beast.

Ferelith stands in the middle, holding out her hands. I watch as the women all slowly move toward her, Neòil backing away from her dragon, and the four of them stand with their hands extending and gripping one another.

Percival, Lachlan, and I stand behind them, our swords drawn and ready to defend our women... our pregnant women. But there isn't much we can do when it comes to this magic, so we stand like fools with our simple manmade weapons, attempting to be strong when the fact is, our women are going to have to protect us.

Never in my life has a woman ever had to protect anything about me. But this isn't anything regular or normal. This isn't her protecting me personally. This is the women from another universe who have been brought here by the gods to protect this world.

"Are we ready?" I ask, just loud enough for the men to hear.

"Never," Percival chuckles.

"Agreed," Lachlan grunts.

“Didn’t think so,” I say.

Then, as if the magic just pours through them, I watch as sparks of light start flowing from all four women’s chests. It is beautiful and terrifying all at once. They are going to defeat the underworld right here and now.

Neòil’s dragon widens his wings and begins to flap them, moving up and down as he lifts his entire body into the air. His roar fills the space, the stone floor shaking beneath our feet right as fire emanates from his mouth.

The six dragons seem to stop where they are. They face us, and then the fight is on. The women’s light continues to flow from them and toward the beasts, and they decide it’s time to begin to charge them.

No more simply circling and making noise. Now they are focused on the women, on us, and they are on their way as fast as their wings will bring them. Neòil’s dragon heads toward them as quickly as he can, and I watch as they clash.

Six against one.

It is not a fair fight.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

HELMI

GRIPPING NEÒIL AND FERELITH'S HANDS, I STARE STRAIGHT ahead as light flows from my body and directly toward the animals that are clashing against Neòil's dragon. I'm not sure if our light is doing anything at all, but I'm far too mesmerized to ask any questions.

I don't feel any different, except maybe a warmth that gathers at my chest and belly. Then I frown, wondering if this can hurt the baby.

"Concentrate," Ferelith whispers. "This is your magic. Focus on the dragons and ridding this world of them. Fight them off. They are not from this world. Neòil's dragon is the only one in this bunch that is organic."

The pressure is on even more. The fact that she said these dragons are not organic makes my stomach hurt just thinking about that. They aren't real, just created to harm us. Even if I already know that in the back of my mind, hearing it confirmed feels like a completely different thing.

Pressing my lips together, I tighten my grasp on Neòil and Ferelith's hands and close my eyes tightly as I think about those six ugly, scarred, synthetic dragons, and I wish them harm. For the first time in my entire life, I hope that an animal dies in front of me. I want to watch them burst into flames.

The sounds of the beasts screeching fill the air, and then there is silence. Slowly, I open one eye, then the other, and I blink at the sight before me. It's exactly what I wished for. It's exactly what I imagined.

All six beasts are on fire in the grass while Neòil's dragon is gliding down to sit and watch the destruction. We release our holds on one another. Nobody speaks. The men hurry toward their wives, but I stay where I am. I watch the soldiers carry buckets of water and pour them around the burning creatures, but they do not put water on the creatures, just around so the fires don't spread.

"Helmi?" Karo's voice calls out.

Turning my head, I look over my shoulder at him. He's standing with his sword held loosely at his side, his gaze focused on me. He doesn't move toward me at all. I can hear the others chattering, but I don't know what they're saying to one another. My focus is on this man.

"Helmi," he calls out again.

I turn around to completely face him, taking one step forward, then another. Stopping directly in front of him, I don't reach out to touch him. I just stare at the beauty that is this man. I've fallen in love with him.

"Karo," I exhale.

"You hold magic," he rasps. "You hold magic, and it is beautiful."

I shift my gaze to my feet. He reaches out, extending his finger and touching beneath my chin, forcing me to lift my head again. My eyes reluctantly find his, and I let out a sigh. He is smiling. Even his eyes smile, the skin beside them crinkling. It's... It's perfect.

"Your magic is beautiful, *rakas*."

"I just wished for six animals to burst into flames and die. I wanted them to die. And even though I know Ferelith said they were created and not real, I feel really bad about being part of what killed them like that."

Karo dips his chin, his mouth touching mine. “Helmi, you were not just part of it. That came from you and only you. The vision you had, you made it happen. I was in your mind the entire time. I could see what you were seeing when you envisioned the scene. I saw every single thing, *rakas*. It was amazing and beautiful.”

Shaking my head from side to side, I take a step backward. “No,” I shout.

I can feel everyone’s eyes swing to stare at us, but I don’t care. I’m not thinking about them right now. I’m focused on the way Karo is watching me and the fact that he clearly was in my head the entire time, which freaks me out completely.

“Helmi?” Ferelith’s sweet voice calls out from behind me somewhere.

Karo growls. He wraps his fingers around the side of my throat and dips his chin slightly so our eyes are directly connected to one another. I hold my breath as I watch him and wonder when this is going to stop.

I’m panicked. I don’t want him to see my visions, to read my mind, to know what I’m thinking. I don’t want him to be able to see what I want to happen. And I don’t want what I envision to always come true. What if I just have a bad dream or something?

“She’s panicking,” Ferelith calls out, but she sounds like she’s underwater. Like she’s far away somewhere.

My vision begins to blur, and Karo’s fingers grip the side of my throat a little tighter as he roars my name. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. The darkness begins to surround me, and then I feel as if I’m falling.

Not just falling down to the hard ground but falling into nothingness.

I fall.

And fall.

And fall.

Blackness surrounds me.

There is nothing, and as I lift my arms and try to reach for Karo, he's not there. I'm in a black abyss of nothingness as I fall with no end in sight. I can't imagine what it will feel like when I actually land. If I'll even survive when I do.

Then I bounce on something, almost like a beanbag chair or one of those giant bouncy blobs for kids. I place my hands down, bracing myself as I look around, but I'm completely alone in this black hole.

Frowning, I call out Karo's name in my mind and wait for an answer.

Nothing.

I call out for Ferelith in my mind.

Nothing.

Then, I shout their names aloud. But there is only silence.

I place my hands over my ears and close my eyes before I scream as loud as I can. My heart races so fast and hard that I feel it in my ears. Opening my eyes, I hope I can see something, anything, but it's all black. And then I begin to cry.

Tears fall down my cheeks and onto my lips. I can taste them, but I don't bother wiping them away. It doesn't matter. I've been taken again, kidnapped, stolen, and deposited into some hole somewhere. I don't think I'm going to be as lucky this time. I have a feeling this is going to be a lot harder situation to get out of than being locked in a tower like a princess.

KARO

HELMI PASSES OUT.

Her knees give out from beneath her, and her body falls backward. I go down to my own knees with her so she doesn't hit her head on the stone beneath our feet. Cradling the back of her head, my hand slams against the ground.

Within seconds, our group surrounds me, but it's Ferelith and Anja who kneel down at my side. They look at me, their

eyes wide and their breaths hitching, then Anja places her hands on Helmi's belly as she closes her eyes. Ferelith places her hand on Helmi's forehead and closes her own eyes.

I watch them do whatever it is they're doing, but my focus is on Helmi and only Helmi. She is breathing, her chest rising and falling with her breaths, but her eyes are not open, and she's not moving.

"Anja?" I whisper.

"She is alive," she says. "But past that, I do not know."

Turning to Ferelith, I clear my throat, but thankfully, she doesn't make me ask. Instead, she lifts her head, her eyes finding mine before she drops her chin in a slight jerk. "She is alive. The babe is alive and thriving. However..." she whispers.

The words hang in the air, swirling around us like living, breathing things. And then there is nothing. Complete and total silence as I wait for her to finish whatever it is she's going to say to me... I'm waiting, and she stares at me as if she's uncertain if she should say the words.

"However, what?" I hiss.

"She is shrouded in darkness, Your Highness. I know not where she is. I'm afraid the underworld has somehow penetrated her mind and is holding her captive there."

"Fix it," I bark.

The witch shakes her head slowly. "I cannot," she whispers.

Turning my attention toward Ilta, I give her a pleading glance, but she shakes her head from side to side as well. None of these women can help me? I have the most powerful witches in the world right here with me, and not a single one of them is able to bring my Helmi back?

"Someone fix this," I demand. "Fix it right now."

"You must save her," Ilta whispers. "There is nothing else we can do."

I want to tell her that she has done absolutely nothing, but I don't. I stare at Helmi lying on the ground, looking extremely peaceful, and I attempt to tap into her thoughts, but there is nothing. I've either been blocked from hearing her thoughts, or she is without thought.

Frowning, I decide I do not like the implications of that, so I inwardly declare that I have somehow been blocked from hearing her thoughts by whatever entity took her from me. And that is exactly what has been done. She has been taken from me.

"Karo?" a soft voice calls out.

Lifting my head, I look in the direction of the voice. It's the women. Neòil and Soleil. They crouch down beside me, then place their hands on Helmi's shoulder and chest. Anja's hand is still on her belly, and Ferelith's is still on her forehead. Ilta has hers on Helmi's other shoulder.

I watch these women. These obviously powerful women surround Helmi, and I wonder if they can save her. If they can't, what happens to her? To my family. To my country. The world. It's too much to attempt to imagine. I pinch my eyes closed, and for the first time in my entire life, I plea to the gods to help me.

I've never been one to ask for anything of anyone. My entire life, I've always made whatever needed to happen *happen*, and whatever didn't, I accepted that. This I will not accept. Helmi being taken from me this way, I do not accept.

So, since it is beyond my power, my control, my kingdom, I pray to the gods.

Over and over and over again.

My pleas are murmurs, but my mind shouts as I beg for help. Anything, anyone, any type of help.

I need it all.

I am not picky or demanding. I will do whatever needs to be done to ensure that Helmi comes back to me safely. I would give up everything tangible in my world. I would move to her world. I would do whatever.

“Please,” I whisper. “I love her.”

There is a crack of thunder, and I open my eyes, lifting my gaze to the sky. Dark clouds consume the once blue-and-white-puff-filled sky. A flash of lightning, and then the only living dragon that is only a few feet from us, expands its wings and begins to flap, arching his neck, and lets out a roar that shakes the stone castle floor.

“The gods,” Neòil whispers.

“No,” Ilta exhales.

“The underworld,” Ferelith says, finishing Ilta’s thought.

Neòil and Soleil stand, their eyes wide with unbridled fear. “We can’t win without Helmi,” they whisper simultaneously.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

KARO

PICKING HELMI UP, I CARRY HER INTO THE CASTLE AND THINK about taking her to our shared room but decide against it. Instead, I take her to the small queen's tower. Setting her down on the bed, I study her face. She's beautiful, my blonde-haired bride.

There is another crack of thunder, so I rise to my feet and turn around. Timo is standing in the doorway, his gaze on me and his eyes searching mine.

"I will stay with the queen, guard her with my life," he announces.

Nodding, I walk past him and out of the room. I can't stay. Even though all I *want* to do is watch her. I want to stare at her. I want to ensure that she's okay. But there's nothing I *can* do for her right now. What I *need* to do is try to fight off the underworld.

Can.

Want.

Need.

Those words. They are all so important. I should be focused on them, focused on all the things they mean and all the things I need to do. But all I can think about is my bride and how to save her.

To protect her.

Again, I've done nothing but fail my Helmi.

Over.

And over.

And over again.

Sinking my teeth in my bottom lip, I unsheathe my sword. Lachlan and Percival stand at the top of the steps, their own swords unsheathed and ready for battle. The dragons have burned and are nothing but ashes. Neòil's dragon squawks as he flies around, fire coming from him every so often.

"Do we know what comes next?" I ask.

There is a moment of silence during which neither of them speaks, then I hear Lachlan's deep rumble as he turns his head and looks at me. Shifting my attention to him, I see he's got a smile on his face.

"Absolutely not," he says.

"And yet you smile," I mutter.

"Only because I am preparing for war. I am ready for this to be done and for our worlds to begin anew," he states.

I agree.

I would like that as well. However, I'm afraid I won't be able to bring Helmi back from wherever she is. What if she is there forever? What happens to us then? As much as I want to say that everything will be perfect once the underworld is defeated, I am unsure what will actually happen.

"Then let's win," I say without voicing my concern over Helmi.

Neòil and Soleil hold hands with Ferelith as they step forward. I don't know why, but as another crack of thunder sounds, we all lift our gazes and attention toward the sky. It's a trick. Because it's not the sky where the second round of beasts come from. It's the cliffside.

They fly but only low to the ground. The beasts. They aren't dragons. They're large-bodied birds. They appear almost crow-like, but their bodies are too large for their wings, and they're unable to fly very high.

I've never seen anything like them before, and judging by the gasps that surround me, I'm not the only one. Holding my sword steady, I am ready for battle, even if these are some mythical creatures that may not die when I charge them.

Ferelith, Neòil, and Soleil clasp hands together. They take a few steps in front of us, and I watch as the glowing colors flow from their bodies and head straight toward the beasts. Moving forward, the three of us are of one unit.

Ilta and Anja are on one side of me, ready to do what needs to be done as well, although I'm not so sure what that will be, considering Ilta isn't supposed to drain her powers, and Anja has none that I'm aware of.

"Watch yourselves, women," I grunt.

They laugh softly, but I can hear the nervousness in their voices. Moving one step at a time toward the beasts, I suck in a deep breath and ready myself. Placing my feet wide, I prepare for war. Lachlan and Percival do the same.

"Our magic isn't working. It's not doing anything," Soleil calls out. "It's just putting out light. I can feel it's not the same as it was. We need Helmi."

"Step back. Go inside the castle," Ilta calls out.

There is a moment of silence as the crow-like beasts are getting closer and closer with each passing moment. Neòil, Ferelith, and Soleil take a step backward.

"Go inside the castle. Take shelter," Percival calls out.

The women stay where they are for another moment, then Ferelith tugs them backward, and they all take off running back into the castle. I'm thankful for that, especially since they said their magic wasn't working right. Maybe they'll try to wake up Helmi.

The beasts get closer, and once they're within a decent distance, we charge them. One slice from my sword against the beast has it exploding in a bright green light. Then another, and it does the same.

"They are synthetic," Percival shouts.

They are.

We fight them.

One after the other explodes in a bright green light, over and over again. They're sent by the underworld. There is a crack of thunder above us, but none of us can stop to look and see what is coming.

We are focused only on these crow things. Then it happens. That crack of thunder turns into a bright orange light, and another beast moves down from the sky, then another, and another.

They appear to be lions.

"There are more," Lachlan grunts.

I can hear my soldiers in the distance fighting the bright green light crows as well. I don't have enough men, enough energy, or enough inside of me to fight the lions. I am fading quickly when it comes to stamina.

"Hold fast," Ilta calls out, then something surges inside of me.

Turning my head, I look back at her. Ilta's palms are facing me, and light emanates from them, albeit weakly. She should not be doing this, but she is. To save our world... to save me, to save Helmi.

With her burst of power, I am able to fight harder, faster, and longer than my body should be able to. We continue for hours and hours until no more beasts remain, and only then do we all fall to the ground completely and totally exhausted.

Then everything goes dark.

HELMI

I FEEL A HAND TOUCH MINE. TURNING MY HEAD TOWARD THE direction of the hand, I blink to try and see whoever is next to me, although I don't need to actually see anything. I know who it is. Karo is beside me. It's his hand, his touch, his sensation.

"Karo, are you okay?" I ask. I feel like I'm shouting, but my voice only comes out as a whisper. There is silence. Nothing else is said as his hand flexes against mine, gripping it tighter. "Please, Karo," I exhale.

Nothing.

Still, I'm in nothingness, and then the hand holding mine disappears and I'm alone in the dark all over again. Tears spill down my cheeks. I don't bother wiping them away. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters.

Nothing matters in this nothingness.

My heart feels broken, tattered, torn, and shredded as each minute passes.

KARO

OPENING MY EYES, I SIT STRAIGHT UP AS I SUCK IN A BREATH and look around. I'm still outside, still on the ground where I fell. Still surrounded by the aftermath of the fight, so I assume I haven't been out long. Ferelith is beside me and smiles, but she looks worried.

"I held her hand. I was beside her. She spoke to me, but I couldn't figure out how to talk back to her."

She frowns, then shifts so she's sitting beside me. I feel too weak to stand at the moment, so I stay where I am but give Ferelith all my attention. "What do you mean you couldn't speak? What did it look like?" she asks.

Sliding my tongue along my bottom lip, I clear my throat before I speak. "It was void," I state. "Pitch black, but it felt like I was surrounded by absolutely nothing."

"Nothing," she exhales.

“Not even black,” I say. “Just nothing. I couldn’t see her, but I held her hand. I heard her voice. I knew it was her.”

Ferelith is silent for a moment, then she lets out a trembling breath. “We must get her back. We haven’t a moment to spare.”

She stands, turning her back to me, and I open my mouth to ask her what she’s referring to, but she is already rushing away from me and toward the other women. I watch as they form a circle. Their hands lift to their lips, and their eyes widen in surprise. I do not like any of it.

Forcing myself to stand, I grab hold of the hilt of my sword as I make my way upright. Slowly, I move toward the women, but they are already on the move and headed inside the castle. Reaching out, I grab hold of the first wrist I can before she moves beyond me.

Ilta stops, turning her head to look at me. Her concerned gaze meets mine, and I open my mouth to ask her what is happening, but before I can say a single word, she surprises me and speaks.

“If we do not attempt to retrieve the queen from the nothingness you described, she could be lost to us forever.”

“What does that mean?” I demand.

She shakes her head back and forth. “It means that her body would be here, but her mind would be stuck in that place for eternity. The underworld is attempting to trap her there. A tower of the mind,” she whispers.

It is just that, too.

A tower of the mind.

Releasing my grasp on her hand, I follow behind the group of women. I can hear Lachlan and Percival behind me, their boots slamming against the stone flooring, their swords clanking along with mine, and then we gather in the queen’s chambers and file inside, stopping at the sight of all the women surrounding my bride.

“What has happened?” Percival asks.

“She is locked in a tower inside of her mind,” I murmur. “There is a time limit of sorts, and if we do not figure out how to rescue her, her mind will forever be there while her body wastes away here.”

It’s the best way I can describe what’s happening. I’m not even sure if it’s real, but I am going to trust the witches when it comes to this. Unable to stand still, I walk to the window and stare out at the landscape.

“Is there anything we can do?” I ask when nothing happens immediately.

They’re gathered around the bed, but nobody speaks, their breathing the only noise in the room. When no one answers me, only then do I turn to look back at the bed. They are solemn as they stare at her, their heads bowed, their eyes closed.

“So, there is nothing to be done?” I snap.

Ilta’s head lifts, her eyes widen, and then she frowns. “I know not of the magic of the underworld, Your Majesty. I am lost in this.”

Chapter Thirty

KARO

FERELITH LIFTS HER HEAD SLOWLY BEFORE SHE TURNS completely around to face me. Her lips are turned down into a frown, her brows snapped together, and she shakes her head slowly. “She will have to fight her own way out, Karo.”

“How?” Percival barks.

He has been fairly quiet this entire time, and his outburst surprises me. I look at him, but he’s staring at Ferelith, his lips pressed together, his brows furrowed, and his face red with anger.

“How can this be?” he demands. “Can you go to her? Can you pull her out?”

Ferelith shakes her head slowly, but it is Soleil who moves toward him, placing her hand on his arm as she tilts her head back, her eyes finding his. Watching them for a moment, it is very clear there is something else happening between them and this isn’t just about Helmi.

“All will be well. It isn’t me, and we are all here for her. We will find a way. Together,” she says, her voice soft and gentle.

Percival shakes his head, his anger still at the forefront of his mind. He is not going to simply let anything go. I should thank him for being so forward about this, for being so

concerned over my wife, but I don't, mainly because I cannot speak.

Nothing comes out as my lips part. Not a single sound from me. Instead, I hear Neòil's gasp, and then she lets out a small cry. Whipping my head to the side, I glance at her. I expect her focus to be on Helmi, but it's not—it's on the window I just stepped away from a few moments ago.

My sword is still loosely held in my grasp, and I face the window again, ready for action. But when I see what greets me, I suck in a breath, my brain unsure of what my eyes are seeing. This cannot be real.

It cannot be in front of me.

"It's a mirage," Lachlan murmurs. "There is no other thing it could be, could it?"

It's a man. He's floating in the air. He must be. I've never seen him or the likes of him before in my life. He's wearing something over his eyes, and he's wearing clothes that are nothing remotely close to what any of us wear or what I've seen donned in foreign lands.

He opens his mouth and lets out a shout before he's hurled through the window and straight for me. I don't have the inclination to lift my sword, but thankfully, I am able to step to the side and avoid being rammed by him.

When he lands, I look down at him. He's wearing dark-blue trousers, boots that are thick-soled, and a thin fabric on his torso.

"What the hell?" he shouts.

The language is odd. I've heard it before, but it's been a while, and I cannot recall what country I've heard it in. "Ilta," I bark out. "Give him the power of our language," I demand.

She moves forward quickly and places her hand against his chest. He tries to push her away, but I lift my hand and point my sword against the center of his throat as I shake my head slowly from side to side.

"Wait," I grind out.

Ilta closes her eyes as she chants something under her breath, then she opens her eyes and stands.

“Do you understand us now?” I ask.

The man frowns as his gaze flicks around to the people standing around him, including Lachlan, Percival, the very pregnant Soleil, and then Ilta. The others are still at Helmi’s bedside, including Timo, who has his own sword drawn and at the ready to defend his queen.

“Where the *fuck* am I?” he demands.

I do not understand every word he’s said, but I understand enough. “This is Maapallo. I am the king, and you are in my land. How did you get here?”

“That’s what I’d like to know. I don’t know what kind of backward shit this is, but I want nothing to do with it. Take me the fuck home right goddamn now. I won’t call the police or turn your asses in for being complete fucking lunatics, but you better let me go. And you can get that sword off my throat.”

I open my mouth to say something. What, I’m not sure. But before anything can come out, Soleil takes a step forward.

“Where are you from?” she asks.

“California,” he answers.

Her eyes widen, and I hear Neòil’s gasp as she rushes to my side. The women are staring at this man, and I cannot describe the way they are watching him. Then Neòil crouches down in front of him.

“Are you Nilo?” she asks.

“How did you know my name? Who the fuck are you people?”

I still don’t understand every word he says. *Fuck* is new to me, but I can’t deny I kind of like the emphasis it creates in a sentence.

“We’re friends of Helmi’s,” Soleil explains.

His eyes widen. I decide to drop my weapon from his throat, and he pushes up to a seated position, his focus flicking

between Neòil and Soleil. He appears to be just as terrified as Helmi was when she first arrived in this world.

“Where is my sister?” he hisses.

“Stand,” I demand.

I wonder if this was all by the design of the gods. We did not bring him here. We could not make him float, but he’s here. He flew through the window. And Helmi is lost in some nothingness world. Perhaps this is a boon from the gods, and they’ve brought him here to help.

As if he’s in a daze, his fight having left his body, he stands and does exactly as I’ve ordered. But only for a moment. Because as soon as he turns around, he catches sight of her. She looks beautiful but lifeless, lying on the bed.

Nilo rushes to his sister’s side, then he finds my gaze with his. “What did you do to my sister?” he grinds out.

“Nothing,” I say. “I’m her husband.”

His eyes widen, his lips part, but nothing comes out. Neòil takes the moment to shift between us, then she begins to talk to him. She tells him the story, at least as much of it as she can. He stares at her, his lips parted and his eyes wide.

I’m not sure he’s really taking much of the story in, as much as just looking straight ahead in shock.

“Nilo?” Soleil asks. “Are you okay?”

He nods his head once, then shakes it from side to side before he clears his throat. “I don’t understand what’s happening and why my sister looks like this. Why is she in this bed? Why isn’t she awake? Did you fucking freaks kill her?” he roars.

Anja shifts through the small crowd. I don’t know what she’s looking for, but she doesn’t speak right away. Instead, she moves, and then I watch as she lifts her hand and places her palm in the center of his chest.

“Helmi is alive. She has been fighting the devils of this world. You have the devil in yours?”

His brows snap together, and he looks down at Helmi, then shifts his attention back to Anja. Whatever she's doing with him, he is much calmer than he was just moments ago. He clears his throat, shakes his head once, then nods it another time before he lets out a heavy breath.

"We do, but they are not real, just stories that people tell to keep everyone in line."

"Here, they are real," Anja whispers. "Helmi is an instrumental part of trying to save this world, and she has suffered a bit for that, but we will get her back. Her body is completely uninjured. It is just her mind. We will find a way, though."

"Her mind?" he asks.

She nods her head, her gaze shifting to Helmi lying on the bed so still. Then, she shifts her attention back to him. "All questions will be answered in time, but right now, we need to work together to try to fight this and win."

"And this fucker married my sister?" he asks, lifting his hand as he extends a finger and points it directly at me.

My lips twitch into a smile. "Helmi is the queen of this country," I say. "Is that acceptable?"

"Queen?"

"Queen," I confirm.

"Fuck," he hisses.

Anja drops her hand from his chest and then dips her chin and moves to the side. Nobody says anything for a long moment, but Nilo looks back at his sister. It seems as though this moment is too intimate, but I won't leave her alone. Not with her brother, not with anyone I don't trust with my own life.

Timo is about the only person right now I would willingly leave her with, and that's only so I can protect her life.

"We have a battle ahead of us. How are your soldiering skills?" Lachlan asks.

Nilo's tongue slides across his bottom lip as he sucks in a breath. "Soldiering?" he asks. "I've never soldiered."

"You've never fought?" Percival asks.

Soleil snorts. "Our world is a lot different than this one," she says. "If I had to guess, you're some kind of techie?"

"Robotics design," he murmurs.

She nods her head, then wrinkles her nose, which reminds me of Helmi. My heart aches instantly at the sight. I've never felt this way before. It's an odd sensation to have these feelings, these extreme emotions that fill me and threaten to spill out.

"He works as a scientist," Soleil announces. "In our world, unless you volunteer in the military, scientists don't need to fight."

What a strange place. As if Helmi's descriptions of things weren't odd enough, there is her brother, who has even stranger things to say about their world. Neòil and Soleil give the man a smile, and then simultaneously, their brows snap together before their gazes find mine.

"If the gods sent him here, does this mean he has magic?" Neòil asks.

Blinking, I stare at her for a moment, then slide my gaze to Nilo. He appears just as confused as I feel on the inside. We stay silent for a moment, nobody speaking. Until Percival clears his throat.

"I think he's the key. Whatever is going to happen next, Nilo is the key."

Percival is likely right, and as much as I want to say that, I don't get the opportunity. I hear a bloodcurdling scream, then a loud crash, and some more screams. Lachlan, Percival, and I all spin around, our swords in hand.

Lachlan shouts to the women. "Stay in the room and do not leave, no matter what you hear," Then he turns to Timo. "Do not allow them to leave this room, Timo."

He dips his chin, ever my right-hand man. “See if they can use Nilo in whatever way possible to bring Helmi back from wherever she is,” I call out as the three of us rush out of the bedchamber.

We make our way down the stairs and toward the screams. Although it’s not exactly what I thought we would come into contact with. I thought the underworld would have much more up its sleeves, but it seems as if it’s ready to fight.

In the middle of the castle’s main hall are three creatures. They’re all shrouded in black, their faces expressionless as they stare straight ahead with all-black orbs for eyes. “The underworld has come to play,” Lachlan hisses.

“Then let us entice them closer,” I murmur. “I am ready to be done with the whole lot of them. I would like to see my brother again sometime soon.”

“I agree,” Percival grinds out. “Let us finish this once and for all.”

Chapter Thirty-One

HELMI

NOTHINGNESS CONTINUES TO SURROUND ME. I TRY TO REACH out, but there is nobody and nothing there. There isn't even a sound, not a single sound anywhere. Until I hear a deep voice. The timbre isn't Karo's, but I recognize it well.

I know that voice.

I've longed to hear that voice.

It's familiar and kind.

It's love.

It's Nilo.

My brother.

I try to follow the voice. Willing myself to wake up. To see him. I need to know he's real, that he's here, that he's come to this world. It's all I've wanted—my brother here with me, my king, my new family, my new world.

But no matter how hard I try, nothing happens. I'm stuck in nothingness, unable to do anything, and I hate it. I cry and cry a little more. But it does no good because nothing happens.

A whole lot of nothing over and over and over again.

KARO

THE THREE BEINGS MOVE FORWARD, BUT THEY DO STOP BEFORE they are close enough to be taken down by our swords. If they can indeed be taken down by our swords. We're unsure. None of us speak. In fact, we all stare straight ahead, ready for whatever is to come our way.

"Where are the chosen?" one of the creatures asks.

I don't know which one it is that is speaking. It doesn't matter. I'm on high alert for all three of them. Percival takes a step forward and decides he's going to be the one to speak for us, and I'm okay with that.

"The chosen ones are not for you," he states.

His tone is firm, his voice clear. The women are not for them. They're our wives. They carry our children. They cannot have them—none of them.

"And yet," one of the things says, "they are."

"Never," Lachlan growls.

There is a moment of silence where we stare at one another, then the figure in the middle moves forward a few feet.

"They are. You're wasting time and energy denying it. Hand the women and babies over, and we will be on our way. You will survive, and once the children come into the world, you can have the women back."

It's my turn to speak. "Never," I growl, then lift my sword and slide it across the figure, well, in front of it.

It doesn't get him.

Or if it does, he doesn't react to it.

Possibly, it's gone through him but didn't penetrate his actual body.

I'm not sure what is happening. Are they real people? Are they entities? What are these creatures that stand before us?

"You enjoy that word, *never*, and yet it *will* happen."

Silence fills the space as we stare at one another.

Three on three.

The most unfortunate numbers in this whole world, and yet, here we are. Moving toward them slowly, I'm unsure of how to approach this. It isn't like we can strategize the way we would in a normal battle.

"And yet it will because the women will never, not fucking ever, go to you," I say, using Nilo's emphatic word that I think I quite like. Lachlan chuckles, obviously noticing my use of the colorful word. Percival snorts, no doubt noticing as well.

"You are not why we are here. You are purposeless," the hooded figure states.

The words float, whispering in the wind around us. I don't like anything about these creatures, and I am unsure of how to fight them. I don't think swords or brawn are going to defeat them.

I have a feeling it's going to need to be something much greater. Something magical. However, we don't have that right now. So, steel and strength are what they will get, and hopefully, we will survive this battle and live to see another day.

"Ready?" I ask.

"Always," Lachlan murmurs.

"And willing," Percival growls.

The creatures move forward, talking no longer something they wish to pursue. They lift their willowy arms, and dark-blue light emanates from their hand-like area.

"Shields," a woman shouts from behind us.

Before I realize what's happening, there is a shield in my free hand. Lifting it, I cover my body with it, and the blue light bounces off and shifts back to the beings. They cry out in a shrill scream that causes my knees to weaken. It is so deafening.

"Hold fast," Lachlan growls.

There is a moment of silence. Our knees are bent, our feet spread wide as we brace for what is to come, and our swords are at the ready. The magic shields protect our bodies, and then something bounces off them.

It sounds as if they are pieces of chain mail that are bursting apart and pelleting the shields. “We must move so our backs are to one another and we can protect our torsos with the shields, then we can move forward all at once,” Percival shouts.

He is indeed correct in his idea, and without hesitation, we do exactly what he described. Moving forward as a unit, our swords out and ready for battle as we step together. One foot after the other, our bodies move as one mass instead of separate beings.

The small metal pieces grow larger as we approach the things. When I hear one of them growl, the sound sends a shiver down my spine. Pressing my lips together, I look over my shoulder at Lachlan, whose wide eyes meet mine.

“Ready?” he mouths.

Jerking my chin in his direction, I take a step forward on my own, covering myself with the shield, and charge one of the beasts. They laugh as they simply move to the side, but their laughter quickly dies when they realize that Lachlan and Percival are on their way as well and I was just a distraction.

The grunts and the hurled screeches fill the air, but it matters not. We will fight. “Hold fast,” the woman’s voice calls out, and before I realize what’s happening, light pours from behind us.

It’s golden. It’s bright and beautiful. It’s mesmerizing, and for a moment, I stop to look at it. Then I shake myself out of the stupor and turn to fight. The beasts lift their hands, and their dark-blue light pours from their palms, but our shields send it right back to them, and they screech again.

The fighting continues. It seems as if there is no stop to it. The beings don’t seem tired. In fact, they do not waver. Their

magic seems to come easily and with no intention of stopping anytime soon.

“Fight,” Percival shouts.

And we do. Rushing them, we begin to thrust our swords out while attempting to hide our bodies behind the shields. Dark-blue light slides across my arm. I hiss at the burning sensation that slices my skin.

Turning my head, I look over to see Lachlan clashing with the being, his loud grunts and shouts filling the air. We fight hard, but we are fighting a losing battle, and the light that flows from behind us is doing nothing to deter them.

“Nothing is working,” I bark.

We continue to fight, none of us speaking other than grunts, shouts, and roars. But I can feel my body weakening with every block of my shield. Every thrust of my sword has my arm feeling as if it’s going to turn to jelly or perhaps even fall off completely.

Then there is silence, and everything stops. The world becomes still. The men around me are quiet, aside from their heavy breathing. I look to Lachlan. His chin is dipped as he attempts to catch his breath. I shift my gaze to Percival, who appears to be in the exact same position.

Slowly, I shift my shield down, looking in the direction of the beings. They aren’t there. In fact, it appears as if they were never there. Spinning around, I look back to see which witch has been helping us.

I assume it is Ferelith, but it’s Ilta who gave us shields, who used her gold-flowing light to attempt to fight off the beings, and perhaps that’s what worked. Maybe that’s why they’re gone now, why they vanished. But when I move a little closer to her, I see she is pale.

“Ilta?” I call out.

Her chest is rising and falling rapidly, her chin dipped, and her hand is gripping the side of the building in what appears to be an attempt to keep her body upright. There is a moment of

silence in which we all stare at one another, then my feet become unstuck from the ground, and I move toward her.

I can hear Percival and Lachlan's boots crunching against the ground behind me as they follow. "Ilta," I murmur once I've reached her.

Slowly, she lifts her head, her gaze finding mine. I can see she isn't just pale as I originally thought. She is sick—she is drained. Her skin is wrinkled and has a gray pallor to it. Her eyes are sunken and also a grayish yellow in color. Her lips are even wrinkled.

"Ilta?" I ask.

"It is my time, Karo. Protect the women and the babies with all your might."

Then her legs give out. Reaching my arms out, I catch her before her body slams against the stone floor of the castle entryway. Her eyes close, she exhales one last time, and then there is nothing left.

Nothing.

She is gone.

But before I can turn to Lachlan and Percival, she turns to ash in my hands, and she is not only spiritually gone, but she is also physically gone. There is nothing left of her but dust. Not a single ounce of her body remains. My heart sinks.

I'm not sure where a *noita* would go in this world, but I hope that wherever it is, she's celebrated. She brought Helmi to me. She brightened my world. Even though I was uneasy and unsure in the beginning, without Ilta's interference, I would not have the woman I love.

"Karo," a voice murmurs beside me.

I don't realize I'm on the ground, my knees resting against the stone floor, but tipping my head, I look up to see Anja standing in front of me. "She is gone now."

"Why?" I ask.

I can hear Percival and Lachlan behind me, but they don't say a word. Their presence is all I need right now for support, although I'm not sure why I would really need support. Yes, Ilta was an inaugural part of this new place in my life, of Helmi coming here, but other than that, I was not close with her.

However, her loss feels like a deep ache I can't quite explain. Sucking in a breath, I look up at her. She gives me a kind smile and crouches down. Her arm reaches out, and her finger extends as she touches the side of my cheek.

"She saved you because she believes in the cause. That was all the magic she had left. Ferelith gave her what she could, but she is weak herself."

"What happens now?" I ask.

Anja slides her tongue along her bottom lip. "I do not know," she whispers. "But whatever it is, we will figure it out. Come up to your chambers and let us try to get the queen out of bed, her brother situated, and save the world."

"Yes, that does sound like a good plan," Percival agrees.

Standing, I look back at the other kings. They are a little worse for wear but seem to be like me and in fairly good shape. Together, we move through the castle and make our way upstairs, one groaning step at a time.

Chapter Thirty-Two

KARO

ONCE WE'RE IN THE BEDCHAMBER, THE WOMEN RUN TOWARD their men, wrap them in warm hugs, and I stare at the woman on the bed with her eyes closed. I want nothing more than for her to open her eyes and hug me as well.

Nothing happens.

Nilo sits beside her bed, holding her hand with his head bowed. Moving toward him, I clear my throat, and he turns his head, his eyes finding mine. He appears to be weary, and I realize this has all finally settled for him.

"Nilo," I murmur.

"I'm in another world," he rasps. "How do I get my sister back?"

Shaking my head, I clear my throat. "I'm unsure," I confess. "But I am going to do all I can to ensure it happens."

He stands from her bedside, anger filling his features as he moves forward one step, then another. I can feel everyone's eyes on me as he approaches one step at a time, then stops, crossing his arms over his chest.

"This place has magic? Fix her," he demands.

"I wish I could," I murmur. "But I don't have magic. She does, these women do, but I do not."

Pressing my lips together, I roll them a few times as I watch him. It's clear he has something on his mind, but he doesn't speak immediately. Instead, he lets out a sigh, then takes a step backward and another until he stands at the end of her bed again.

"Fix her. I do not care what it takes. Fix her."

Soleil, Neòil, and Ferelith move forward until they're surrounding the bed as well. Ferelith is beside Nilo. She takes his hand, then she reaches over with that hand, and together, they place their palms against Helmi's leg.

Soleil and Neòil stand on the other side, and they place their hands together, then set them down against Helmi's other thigh. "Close your eyes, Nilo," Ferelith exhales.

Anja is beside me. She reaches out and touches her hand to my forearm in a comforting gesture. I don't know if I feel comforted, but I'm going to at least try. Nobody in the room speaks.

Our focus is on the four people beside the bed, their palms resting against her thighs. Then Ferelith's low hum fills the room before she begins to sing. The song is beautiful, low, hypnotic. Then, the same glow from earlier emanates from them and flows straight into Helmi.

I hold my breath, watching them.

Hoping against all hope that Nilo is the key to this all.

Ferelith continues to sing. Timo stands close by, his sword in hand, as he protects my queen, his queen. Dipping my chin to him, I try to convey my respect, although I'm not sure it could come through a simple nod.

"They will bring her back. If anyone can, it will be them," Lachlan murmurs from beside me.

I want to believe him, but I'm not sure it's possible anymore. My hope is beyond lost. Ilta has given her life to this. She's gone, turned to dust. Those things that came are now gone, but that doesn't mean that they or something even worse won't come back.

I'm dirty, covered in blood, hot, and exhausted.

There is a knock on the chamber door, and I turn my head from the bed in time to see Anja hurry toward it. Slowly, the door opens, and I smile at the sight of the cook holding a tray of food.

"I thought after that battle I should bring some food," she states as she walks into the room and sets the tray down on the small table. Her gaze is focused on Helmi and the flowing light that emanates from the women and Nilo into her body. She doesn't ask any questions, though I'm sure she has plenty.

"Thank you, Cook," I murmur.

She dips her chin, then slips out of the room as if she wasn't even here. Smiling, I walk over to the tray and decide to get some bread and cheese. Eventually, Lachlan and Percival join me. We eat in silence, our bodies finally coming down from the adrenaline.

I reach for a goblet of wine and suck down the contents as Nilo's voice behind me shouts out.

"Holy freaking shit, it's working,"

I only understand the *it's working* part of his sentence, which causes me to spin around and watch as Helmi's body arches off the bed as if she's floating, then it drops back down with a bounce as her eyes pop open.

I rush to her side. I want to push everyone out of the way and demand they leave the room, but I decide against it. Instead, I gather her hand in mine at the side of her bed, my gaze silently searching hers for a moment.

"Helmi?" I ask. "My *rakas*?"

Her lips curve up into a grin, her eyes smiling as she gazes up at me. "Karo?" she asks. "Is that you?"

"It's me, Helmi."

Bending, I wrap my hand around the side of her neck and touch my lips to hers in a chaste kiss before I lift my head slightly. "I missed you," I murmur.

“You came to me. You held my hand,” she whispers.

“I did,” I confess. “I wish I could have stayed.”

Her smile grows wider. “I’m glad you didn’t,” she murmurs. “You needed to be here.”

I did, too. Although she doesn’t know why. I hope that whatever comes our way, she never has to see the destruction that has already come and gone. Resting my forehead against hers, I suck in a deep breath, then let it out slowly.

“I don’t know how it happened, but someone has come here to visit you, *rakas*.”

Straightening, I take a step back so she can see Nilo, who stands just a few feet from me at her legs. There is a gasp, then she cries out his name. I make a mental note to ensure that she cries out my name later, except louder and with much more urgency.

HELMI

I GASP AT THE SIGHT OF NILO.

My brother.

Is this a mirage?

He smiles, reaches out, and wraps his hand around mine, squeezing it gently. We stare at one another in silence. I am in complete shock that he’s here, that he’s sitting in front of me. That this is real.

“Nilo,” I exhale.

“You have to tell me what the actual fuck is going on here. Where have you been? What the fuck is happening?” he grinds out, and my lips curve up into a smile because that single sentence is the only confirmation that I need that it’s really him. This is no mirage, this is not evil magic, this is my brother.

“How did you get here?” I ask, my gaze flicking from Nilo’s hand to his face. He gives me a small smile, but I can see the fear in his eyes as he searches my gaze. We stare at one

another for another moment, then he smiles softly before he answers.

“I’ve been worried fucking sick about you, Helmi,” he rasps, his words coming out on a hushed whisper.

“I’m sorry,” I exhale. “How did you get here? Are you okay?”

He nods, though I can tell that he wants to ask me more. But he doesn’t, at least not yet. So, instead of asking me anything else, he answers my question.

“I would say you wouldn’t believe me, but after just the few things I’ve witnessed here, I think you might.”

“I would,” I rasp. “I would believe it all.”

Placing my hands near my hips on the mattress, I push myself up to a seated position. Anja hurries and helps me adjust the pillows behind my back. I don’t know why I’m still in this bed. It’s not like I’m sick or anything. But the idea of standing up right this second fills me with a little anxiety, so I’m happy to stay where I am for the moment.

I watch as the people—no, that’s not right—the family in the room starts to move chairs around, and then food is being passed from one person to another and a small plate is brought to me.

Nilo clears his throat before he begins his story. “I had a headache. It was killing me all fucking day. So, when I got off work, I decided to lie down on the couch and try to sleep it off.”

I can’t help but smile at his story, not because he had a headache, but because it’s Nilo. I’ve missed this so much, every part of him. I knew I did, but having him here with me, I realize how much I truly did miss every inch of my brother.

Maybe it’s not a normal sibling relationship. I know that not everyone is as close as we are, but Nilo is Nilo, and I love him.

“And when I woke up, I was fucking flying in front of the window here,” he continues, lifting his hand and pointing at

the window in my room. He leans closer so his face is in front of mine. “Flying, Helmi. *Flying.*”

His eyes are wide as he shakes his head once to drill his point home, then he leans back in his chair with a huff. “Flying,” he repeats to himself. “And that doesn’t even include the weird glowing shit that’s around here, the freaky-ass things that were throwing shit at your man, which, by the way... you’re married, and I can’t even process that.”

Extending my arm, I wrap my fingers around his wrist and squeeze gently. “I am, and we will have plenty of time to talk about all of it, but right now, we need to focus on the underworld.”

“So every-fuckin’-body keeps saying,” he snaps.

I can’t help but laugh softly before I turn to Karo, my eyes connecting with his for a moment before I speak. I want to ask a million questions. I’m not sure what happened while I was out or how long I was even gone, but I feel as though I need every detail of what happened during my time lost to nothingness.

“Tell me what I’ve missed and what’s to come, other than Nilo making his way into this world,” I say with a smile.

Karo’s lips tug into a smirk, and he turns his head, jerking his chin toward Neòil and Soleil. “The women will tell you. Rest and eat. The men and I have much to discuss. If you need anything, ask Timo, and he will come get me in my chambers, yes?”

Frowning, I think about him walking away from me, but I know he and his men are planning a war, or at the very least, a defense. Giving him a smile, I try to look happy and dip my chin in a single nod.

“Go and plan the winning strategy of the war,” I reply.

Karo laughs softly as he stands. He’s covered in dirt and blood, his hair is a mangled mess, and I would say he appears to be frightening, but instead, he is actually sexy as shit.

Sliding my tongue out to taste my bottom lip, I realize I’m suddenly extremely thirsty. He winks, knowing exactly what

I'm thinking before he turns and walks away. He only gets a couple of steps out of the room before he stops. He lets out a bark of laughter, turning his head to look over his shoulder, his gaze finding Nilo's.

“Are you coming with us, brother?” he asks.

My heart warms instantly at his question. Brother. Nilo stands, clearing his throat, wearing clothes from our world, and I realize how truly out of place he is here. Karo must, too, because he frowns for a beat and then turns to Timo.

“Timo,” he calls. “Find something for Nilo to wear and have it brought to my chambers.”

Then he and the rest of the men are gone, with Nilo following close behind them. Timo slips from the room, his attention on the new wardrobe he must secure. Once he's gone, I turn to Anja and open my mouth, but she shakes her head once.

“We have much to tell you,” she whispers.

Chapter Thirty-Three

HELMI

I STARE, UNSURE I HAVE HEARD WHAT I'VE HEARD. "ARE YOU serious?" I ask when they just stare at me. "She's gone?"

Anja dips her chin. "She is gone. Her last act was to save all of us. The underworld grows stronger. I don't know how, but it is clear it aims to win."

"Of course it does. It's not going to break a curse and create all this drama and not try to win," I reply.

Neòil laughs. "It wouldn't, that's for sure."

"So, what do we do?" I ask, my gaze flicking from Neòil to Anja and then landing on Ferelith.

Ferelith is the only one I know of in this room who could possibly have any answers. She takes half of a step forward, then stops, tilts her head to the side, lets out a sigh, then turns and walks to the window.

We all watch her.

"Ilta is gone. She held magic, but it was very unstable. It's not a bad thing that she is gone, although it's also not going to do us any favors. So, we must think of our own plan. It's clear that you all hold magic, except I fear what will happen to Helmi if she uses it again."

Lacing my fingers in my lap, I look down at my hands, twisting them a few times before I slowly lift my gaze again.

Ferelith slowly turns from the window, her eyes finding mine, and I watch as they glow for a moment before they turn back to normal.

“What should our plan be?” I ask. “I have no idea what to do.”

“Do you know what we should do, Ferelith?”

She shakes her head once, then she takes a step backward and faces us completely. “No. None of us knows what to do,” she whispers. “This is all new.”

New.

Pressing my lips together, I look down at my lap again. I’m not sure what to say or do at this point. Nobody does. All I know is that I want nothing to do with that darkness. I would do anything to not go back there again.

“They want our babies,” I whisper.

“They do,” Neòil rasps. “All three of them.”

“We cannot let that happen,” Soleil growls. “We will not let that happen.”

“No, we won’t,” I chime in.

Silence surrounds us like a living, breathing thing. *Silence*. There is always silence. Throwing the comforter off me, I shift my legs to the side of the bed and place my feet on the floor. Forcing myself to stand, I close my eyes as my legs tremble with the weight of my body.

“I wasn’t out long, was I?” I ask with a heavy sigh.

Ferelith hums, but it’s Neòil who speaks. “Not long, thankfully.”

I’m not sure where I’m going to walk, but I do. One foot in front of the other, over and over, until I reach Ferelith’s side by the window. She moves away from me slightly, her hand touching my shoulder as she does.

“We will prevail, Helmi. We must. Your brother is here, and he holds magic. The gods brought him to us for a reason, and it is so we can defeat them,” Soleil says.

“We will,” I agree, although I don’t feel as if I’m as confident as she is.

I want to be, but the simple fact is that I am completely out of my element here. I don’t know what the hell is going on, and while I’m excited to have Nilo here, I’m also terrified. Not just because I don’t want him to get hurt but because it’s up to me *and these women* to save a whole world.

A whole world.

Not a person, not people, but an entire world.

Sucking in a breath, I make my way over to the table and sink down in one of the chairs. My stomach growls as I reach for a piece of bread. I rip off a piece, place it in my mouth, and chew as I try to think.

“Whatever we do,” I say, “whatever we do, we must do it together. The magic, it doesn’t work unless we’re all together,” I murmur.

Ferelith nods her head. “I agree,” she says softly. “We must be together.”

It’s clear she is neither comfortable nor in her element. I wouldn’t be either. In fact, I’m not. I’m the exact opposite of comfortable with what’s happening around me. I am nervous and scared, and at any given moment, I might just break down into tears.

“So, we just hold hands, think really hard, and hope for the best?” Soleil asks.

Ferelith lets out a sigh. “It seems that is what we should do.”

“A spell?” Neòil asks.

Ferelith shakes her head. “No spells. But I don’t think we would want them anyway. Those are what put the world in this predicament in the first place.”

“Then what else? Hope and a prayer?” I ask.

“The gods?” Soleil asks.

Ferelith doesn't speak, doesn't say a single word, but Neòil takes a step forward. "How do we do that?" she asks. "Contact the gods?"

Ferelith shakes her head slowly from side to side. "They can come to us when they feel it's necessary, but we cannot call on them to appear for us."

I figured that was the case, but it was worth a shot. I wish there were some kind of chant we could sing to bring them to us. It would be much easier that way. I open my mouth, not sure what I'm going to say, but it doesn't matter because there is suddenly a loud screeching sound.

"Oh god," Neòil whispers.

I don't understand why she and the others look so panicked. They all rush toward the window and shove their heads out to look at whatever is making that awful noise. I don't know what's going on, but they seem to be really upset by what's happening outside.

I'm not sure why, but I don't move. I'm here, and I'm watching them, waiting for whatever is going on and their reactions to it. They are totally engrossed, then Ferelith spins around.

"We must go down there," she announces.

The screeching sounds again, and I frown. "Why would we go down *there*?" I ask.

"Because the only way to stop those things is with our magic," Neòil states.

"Then we go," I say.

I have no idea what these things are, and I can't deny I'm a bit concerned with what I'm about to walk outside and witness. What is going to greet me. I gather my skirts in my hands and breathe deeply a few times.

Soleil jerks her chin, and the five of us hurry down to the courtyard of the castle. I'm barefoot, my dress dragging the ground, and then we stop together at the top of the steps. "They're back," Neòil whispers.

“They?” I ask.

She turns her head, her eyes finding mine before she speaks. “These creatures are who killed Ilta.”

“Then we must defeat them,” I whisper as I reach out for their hands.

Ferelith and Neòil wrap their fingers around mine, and we all puff our chests outward, facing those... *things*.

“Ready?” Ferelith calls out.

“Ready,” we answer simultaneously.

Something warm fills me before it begins to shoot out of my chest. It flows and heads straight for the *things*. Pinching my eyes closed, I chant to myself over and over.

I’m not sure if it does or not. My eyes are closed the entire time. I pray they will turn to dust the same way Ilta did. I’m not sure if it works. But I try my hardest. The sound of the screeching fills the space around us. It bounces off everything, echoing until there is silence.

KARO

THE NOISE THAT FILLS THE AIR AND REACHES US THROUGH THE window causes my entire body to jerk. I know that sound. It seems like I just fought that sound only moments ago. They’re back. I turn to the other men, who seem to have the same reaction and sense of urgency as I do.

Together, the four of us and Timo hurry down to the courtyard. The sight that greets us is not what any of us expect. Especially Percival, who shouts Soleil’s name. But she ignores him, that is, if she can even hear him between the sound of the screeching and whatever they’re channeling with their magic.

Nilo breaks away from our group and walks straight toward the women. The screeching grows louder, and he takes Neòil’s hand at the end of the line. There is a moment of silence when he joins before the light begins to flow from him as well.

“The gods sent him to us,” Lachlan whispers beside me.

“They did,” I agree.

“Let us go,” Percival growls as he lifts his shield.

He begins to run toward the screeching beings, and Lachlan and I follow. Lifting the shields, we charge forward. The screeching is so loud that my ears ring, but I do not stop. Continuing forward, I feel things hit the shield and bounce off. I don't know what it could be, and I don't try to find out either.

Once we're close enough to them, all three of us shout and let out roars as we begin to thrust our swords forward.

Over and over and over again.

It feels as if my sword penetrates nothingness. It's as if I'm just practicing and slicing through the air, except the shrieking shifts to a sound of pain.

We don't stop. Bolts of color surround us. They shoot back and forth, up and around, but we do not cease. I'm sure it would be a beautiful rainbow of color if I were able to see any of it. But I'm busy fighting, and as long as there is screeching, I will continue to fight in an effort to save my family—my wife, my country, my world.

Behind us is a loud noise, a roar, and then fire. It is the dragon. He must have come to Neòil's aid. I'm grateful for it, as my body is worn from the battle. Rest is not something I have been able to partake in, and I can feel my body wearing down with each thrust of my sword and each block of my shield.

Then there is nothing.

“Is it done?” Percival asks beside me.

Unsure, I turn my head and look over my shoulder to the women. I'm not sure what I expect to see, but I'm grateful when they are all standing, including Nilo at the end, seemingly unharmed. Turning back to the beings, I lower my shield. They are gone. Where they once stood, there's nothing but piles of ash.

“This cannot be it, can it?” I ask.

“No, it cannot,” Ferelith calls out as she moves toward us. “These are minions. They are weakening. The leaders will come forth next.”

“How do you know this?” I ask.

Her lips twitch into a smile. “They’ve tried beasts, creatures, and beings. They will not be sending anyone else. They will want to end this once and for all. Prepare for the worst because it’s on the way.”

Lachlan lets out a sigh that I feel down to my bones. He’s as exhausted as I am. We all are. I thought we would at least have the night to recoup, yet we’ve already fought a second battle. Seems as though, without a doubt, there is another on the way.

I am unprepared for this.

I am also drained, and as I look back at the women, the queens, and all three of them in different stages of pregnancy, I can see the exhaustion on their faces. They do not have another round in them.

This is what the underworld wanted.

This is what they were creating.

Fatigue for an easy takeover.

But we will not yield—*ever*.

Chapter Thirty-Four

HELMI

MY THIGHS TREMBLE, AND MY KNEES THREATEN TO GIVE OUT from beneath me. Nilo slides his arm around my waist in an effort to keep me from falling onto the hard stone ground. Then I watch when he, with his other arm, does the same with Soleil.

She's heavily pregnant and looks extremely pale. I watch as she clutches her belly, her head turning to the side, her eyes wide and her lips parted before she lets out a whimper. Nilo releases me in an effort to stabilize her as she begins to go down.

"She's in labor," I shout.

The men arrive just as I'm moving toward her. Percival scoops her into his arms. "Get the doctor," Karo roars as he follows behind her. Neòil moans somewhere in the distance, and I hope she's not hurt, but right now, my focus is on Soleil, who clearly is having a major issue.

A baby.

A baby in the middle of a war.

A baby in the middle of a war in a country that is not hers and a home that is not her own.

Timo is nearby and follows closely, though he breaks off and heads to the kitchens. I hear him shouting out orders for clean rags and hot water. It's in this exact moment that I

realize there isn't going to be a sterile hospital room to deliver this child.

Or my child.

My feet come to a halt at the realization. I place my hand on my belly, my breath hitches, and I let out my own whimper. Although, mine isn't in pain. It's more in shock. Neòil must comprehend it at the same time because she stops next to me with her own audible concern.

I turn my head to look over to her. She slowly shifts her attention to me as well. "No hospital," I whisper.

"No medicine," she says.

"What are we going to do?" I ask.

"You're going to birth your babies and live happily ever after, like thousands of other women in this world," Ferelith snaps, coming up behind us. "Now, let us go and help our sister in her delivery."

It's all well and easy for her to say that, but I've read history books, and I know that women and babies often die during childbirth, so I'm a little freaked out, to say the least. I don't want to go in that room and help Soleil, not that I don't like her, because I do. But I don't want to be part of it.

What if I mess something up and kill her or the baby?

"You will not hurt your friend," a deep voice murmurs from behind me.

With a gasp, I spin around to see a bloody, weary Karo standing behind me. "You read my thoughts?" I ask on a whisper.

Neòil's breath hitches. Perhaps she didn't realize he could read my thoughts. Or maybe she is just surprised he's behind us. I don't know, and I don't ask. My focus is on my husband and only my husband.

"They were panicked thoughts, *rakas*. I had to. I could tell you were upset," he explains, his voice gentle and soft.

It is clear he is treating me like a wild animal he's trying to calm down. I would normally find that annoying, but right now, I think I need it. I'm trembling. My entire body is shaking as I think about Soleil and what she's going to go through.

"All will be well, Helmi. I will be close by. You hold magic. All of you do. This will be fine. Go and help your fellow queen."

Karo dips his chin, then gently touches his lips to mine before he lifts his head and takes a step backward. Reaching out, I wrap my fingers around Neòil's hand and squeeze as my gaze finds hers.

"We can do this," she whispers.

"We can," I agree, although I am not as confident as I attempt to make myself sound.

Together, we make our way to Soleil's side. If nothing else, I can hold her hand. I can at least do that. But I'm not sure what else I will be able to provide. I'm scared to death that something is going to happen to her or the baby.

This feels like some kind of death march. One foot in front of the other, we make our way toward the room and stop at the closed door. I hear moaning, then whimpering, and I know it is her. She's in pain.

Neòil reaches out, wraps her fingers around the doorknob, and pushes it open without giving us another moment to contemplate running. We walk through the door, and the sight that greets us is everything I am terrified of.

Soleil appears to be in serious pain. Ferelith is at her side, and there are four other women running around with pots full of water and cloths at the ready. It looks exactly the way I've always pictured a medieval birthing room and nothing I've ever wanted to experience.

Neòil is a lot less freaked out than I am. She drops my hand and hurries to Soleil's side while I stand at the end of the bed, my body trembling with selfish fear. It is selfish, too, because while I am worried that something will happen to her,

I am far more concerned with myself and what is to come in the next eight months.

“Helmi,” Ferelith snaps.

My back straightens, and my gaze flicks to her. She dips her chin. “Come and hold Soleil’s hand. I must check her.”

Check her?

Those two words send a chill down my spine, but nevertheless, my feet move to Soleil’s side, and I slip my palm in hers after Ferelith rushes away. Everything in this room is moving in fast-forward. Everyone is running around. I don’t think I’ve ever seen any of these people move this fast in all the time I’ve been here.

Soleil’s fingers grip mine so hard that I inwardly whimper, but I don’t say anything or tell her to stop. I can’t imagine the pain she’s in right now. In fact, it’s unimaginable. Biting the inside of my cheek, I pinch my eyes closed and say a little prayer for the health and safety of both her and the baby.

When my prayers are over, I open my eyes and watch as a woman dressed in what appears to be a cook’s outfit makes her way into the room, with Anja close behind her. She’s carrying a leather bag, and I watch as the door closes.

“I am the midwife,” she announces.

Anja stands beside the midwife, looking at her, and I realize she’s probably going to be her helper. I am so lost. This whole situation doesn’t just stress me out. It scares me to death. Every single minute that passes, I wonder what is going to happen next, and that doesn’t even include the underworld because I know it’s on the way.

“She will be ready soon,” Ferelith calls out. I forgot she was checking Soleil.

Although, I don’t think it’s the same kind of checks they do in our world. I don’t ask, though. I honestly do not want to know. I will just have to be surprised when it’s my turn. At least, that’s what I tell myself.

Soleil moans, squeezing my hand and bringing my attention back to her. Focusing on her, I give her a tight-lipped smile. “What do you need?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “I’m exhausted, Helmi.”

And I have no doubt she is. “You can do this. You are so strong. Hold on. Soon, it will be done, and your sweet baby will be in the world,” I whisper.

She gives me a weak smile. I can see the fatigue in her eyes. Her magic has been spent, her body is frail, and now she has to do this with no pain meds.

Neòil leans down on her other side, and Soleil’s head lolls over to her. Neòil smiles, her gaze searching hers before she dips her chin. The midwife shouts that it’s time to start pushing, and my eyes widen.

Soleil’s hand squeezes mine. Lifting my gaze to meet Neòil’s, I give her my most concerned gaze.

“Try to give her your strength,” Neòil urges over Soleil’s screams and pushes.

I don’t know how to give her my power, but I reach over Soleil’s chest and take Neòil’s hand. The three of us create a circle, our hands gripping tightly, and I try as hard as I can to give Soleil my strength.

Pinching my eyes closed, I attempt to focus amidst Soleil’s cries and growls. I’m not sure what happens, but my stomach starts to feel warm from the inside out, but I don’t break my concentration.

I don’t look around and try to figure out what’s happening because I know that if I do, I could potentially put Soleil in danger, and that is the last thing I want to do. I want to take away her pain, I want to give her strength, I want to make sure she is safe and survives, that the baby does, too.

“One last push. I can see his head,” the midwife growls.

Her voice is loud. It’s deep, and something about it catches me off guard. Turning my head, I open my eyes and see her...

except it's not the midwife who walked through the door. It's a dark, cloaked being.

"No," I cry out.

The hooded midwife figure lifts its head, its eyes finding mine, and they glow yellow. I open my mouth to shout again, but instead, Neòil beats me. She releases my hand and extends her arms, her palms facing the being.

I watch as a burst of light shoots from her, and then, as if it sparks something inside of me, I am shaken from my stupor and do the same. Light and warmth emanate from me, aiming straight for the being.

Ferelith must realize what's going on because I watch as she shifts in front of the being and continues to guide Soleil in giving birth. I don't know what the hell is taking place or how this thing got in here without any of us knowing. And what happened to the real midwife? Because this thing is not her.

"Call the men," I cry out to Anja, who, like I was, is frozen in fear.

My words cause her spine to straighten, and she turns and runs out of the room. The other women who are supposed to be assisting the real midwife are as frozen as Anja had been. My yelling does not entice them to move, and I wonder if they're under some kind of spell or something because they don't even blink from what I can tell.

Shaking my head, I focus my energy back onto the being... the thing... the creature in front of me that I know is trying to take that newborn baby for itself, and I will die before I allow that.

Not only because I love Soleil.

Not only because I want to save this world, my new world.

But also because there is no way in fuck that this woman is going to go through the pain of birthing this baby in this primitive hellhole and not keep her goddamn baby.

And with that last thought, a bright burst of energy and light spills from my hands and slams into the being, causing it

to disintegrate right before our eyes. Soleil's screams fill the room at the same time Ferelith cries out, and the door opens right as the new baby enters the world.

My knees give out, and I fall to the hard floor with a thud. I brace myself with my hands on the floor and let out a heavy exhale. My breaths come out in pants, and I try to catch myself. I don't want to pass out and get lost to the nothingness again.

I don't know what is happening in the background. I can hear a lot of talking, shouting, crying, but nothing specific. I can't make out any actual words. I'm too busy telling myself to breathe in and out slowly, evenly, calmly.

A shadow falls over me, and I shift my face up to look up at the man who stands above me. It's Karo. He gives me a smile, although I can tell his expression is concerned. He holds out his hand, palm facing upward, and waits for me to slip my hand in his.

I do.

Slowly, he helps me stand to my feet.

"Let us give the new parents some space."

"No," I whisper. "No. The underworld."

He looks to the side, then returns his attention to me. "You and Neoil have done your duty here. The child is safe. Soleil is safe. Give them some time, *rakas*."

They are safe.

Safe.

Thank the gods. All of them. However many there are in this world, thank every single one of them.

Chapter Thirty-Five

KARO

PICKING HER UP, I CARRY MY BRIDE INTO OUR CHAMBERS before setting her down in front of the bed. Her feet touch the floor, and her arms wrap around my neck. When her gaze lifts to mine, I watch as her eyes widen.

She looks up at me. Her eyes are watery, and I can tell she's half panicked about what's transpired this evening. I cannot blame her. Birth under normal circumstances is dangerous, but this evening was beyond that.

"Everything is going to be okay," I remind her.

"Is it?" she asks. "Is it really? Because Soleil was giving birth with no meds, with a demon-looking thing at her crotch, who tried to take her baby to the underworld. And I was standing with Neòil, trying to give her strength to birth said baby, and then we had to fight the demon thing, and it turned to ash, leaving us with no actual midwife," she cries, sucking in a deep breath before letting it out slowly as if she's trying to calm her nerves down, but it's clear she is rambling and upset.

"Are you quite finished?" I ask.

Her eyes widen, then her tongue sneaks out before it slides across her bottom lip. "I am, but that doesn't mean I'm not terrified."

My lips curve up into a grin. I do not understand how our entire world could be in peril, yet all I can think to do is bed

my wife. I cup her cheek as her own arms fall from my shoulders. Sliding my thumb beneath her eye, I feel her silky-smooth skin and grin at the sight of her beauty.

“All will be well, my wife.”

“Will it, though? That almost wasn’t.”

I hum, lean down slightly, and touch my mouth to hers. “But it was. You saved your friend and her babe. You and Neòil are heroes. The underworld will find its ways to create havoc until we are able to defeat them. Until that time, we must continue to simply persevere.”

“You’re my hero,” she whispers before I feel her tongue slide across my bottom lip.

Her fingers curl around the back of my neck and tangle in my hair. Reaching down, I grab hold of her bottom with both hands and pick her up off the floor, her legs wrapping around my waist when I do.

Stumbling backward a few steps, I turn and walk over to the wall, the bed tempting but the wall even more so. I press her back against the hard stone and touch my mouth to hers, sliding my tongue inside of her to taste her fully.

I have not properly kissed my own wife since she returned from the nothingness, and it has seemed like a lifetime without her taste on my tongue. Her hands shift, her fingers leaving my hair and gripping my shoulders as she arches her back with a moan.

Feeling her breasts firmly pressing against my chest, I slide one of my hands between us, gliding it beneath her skirts to feel her center. I break the kiss and watch her, feel her, and wait for her to come undone around me, knowing she will, and it will be grand.

She’s warm and wet.

I slip two fingers inside of her, curling them before I press my thumb against her clit. Slowly, I begin to draw small circles there, watching her as I do and smiling at the sight of her eyelids fluttering closed.

Helmi lets out a whimper as her nails dig into my shoulders. “*Rakas*,” she whispers.

The way she says it, I know she is close. Her panting breaths fan my face as she lifts her hips to meet my touch, to search. Leaning forward, I touch my lips to the center of her throat before I speak.

“Find your release, Helmi. Show me just how beautiful you are when you fall apart beneath my touch.”

She whimpers, the noise in her throat vibrating against my lips. I watch her, knowing she is so close, she’s on the edge, and she’s about to jump. She’s about to fall over, and then she does, and I am able to do nothing else but watch.

Her eyes pop open, her lips part, and then her breath hitches and her entire body stiffens, frozen, as the pleasure rolls through her. It’s beautiful. Stunning to witness, and I wonder if I will ever get tired of this moment, of this with her, and I know I will not.

Helmi is my destined wife for so many reasons, and even if she were not here in front of me, even if the gods had not produced her for me, I know my life would be empty without her by my side.

She leans forward, her lips touching mine, then I feel her mouth move. “Please, Karo.”

“Please?” I ask, my lips turning up into a smile.

I know what she pleads for, and yet I wish to hear her say the words aloud. Every single one of them. She lets out a growl. My fingers begin moving inside of her again, and she sighs against my lips, her words lost for another moment.

“Please what?” I ask, bringing her back to me.

“Please, Karo. I need you.”

The words would normally be enough for me to ravish her instantly. But right now, in this life and in this circumstance, I want to hear all of them. Every single word. And I will wait for them. I will happily wait.

Before I can ask her again, she lets out a growl of frustration and pulls her head away from my lips, her eyes rolling to the ceiling, then she shifts and levels me with an almost glare. I can't help but continue to smile at her.

She's so beautiful.

So frustrated.

So mine.

"I need you inside of me... *please*." Her last word is said with her teeth clenched together.

Touching my lips to the center of her throat, I decide to put her out of her misery. "As you desire, My Queen."

Gripping her bottom tighter, I pull her from the wall and walk toward the bed. Then I do as my queen pleads, but before that, I strip her of her clothes and then my own before I sink my length deep inside her hot, wet heat.

My eyes never leave hers. This woman owns not only my body but my mind and my soul as well. She is truly my destined bride, my match—my love.

HELMI

KARO WRAPS MY BRAID AROUND HIS HAND THREE TIMES. HIS eyes are focused on the long strands of blonde hair. He doesn't move, his grip tight, but he's not pulling my hair... he's studying. I bite my bottom lip as I think about asking him what he's thinking, but I also know him well enough by now to know he will tell me when he's ready.

"Why do you keep your hair so long?" he asks. "Is this something that is common in your world?"

Tipping my head back, I look up into his eyes. His brows are knit together, and he is seriously concerned about this, or maybe he's just curious. Either way, he appears to have been thinking about this for some time and hasn't asked me until today.

“My hair was longer than most people in my world before I came here, but it seems like since I’ve arrived, it’s grown at a much faster rate. Plus, it’s not like I’ve had time to get a trim,” I say.

His concern turns into a deep frown. “You would want to cut it?” he asks.

Smiling, I bite the inside of my cheek before I answer him. “When I was locked in that tower, I thought that maybe it might get long enough that I could try to somehow climb down it and get away. Maybe cut it off and tie it to the bedpost or something, but now that I’m free, that I’m here, I kind of like how crazy long it is.”

“I’d rather you not cut it, *rakas*,” he rasps. “I find that I rather enjoy holding on to it while we are with one another.”

My breath hitches at his mention of that, considering we just did *that*, and he did indeed tug and hold on to my braid several times while he was inside of me.

I loved it.

I want more of it... every day.

“Then I will continue to grow it out, although it doesn’t take much effort here,” I say.

Karo releases my braid and pushes up to a sitting position. His bare chest is on display, and I reach out to touch the hair there. It’s soft and short, dark-blondish brown like the hair on his head.

He’s beautiful.

I’ll never get tired of thinking that he is, either. Every single time I see him, it catches me off guard—how amazingly gorgeous he is.

“We should take a bath before it is time to go down to dine,” he murmurs.

We should.

Except I want to stay locked in this room forever with him. I don’t want to see anyone. I don’t want to fight the

underworld. I want to sleep and have sex, eat, and then sleep some more. I'm exhausted, both emotionally and physically.

"We must eat, Helmi. We can do those other things for months once the underworld is gone and our world is safe."

"I don't just hate that you can read my mind," I grumble, "I also hate that I forget that you can read my mind."

He lets out a laugh, shaking his head a few times. "I will learn to control it as much as I can. However, you were being pretty loud."

Rolling my eyes, I watch as he stands from the bed and walks to the door. He sticks his head out, and I hear him order a bath. He's completely naked, totally unashamed of his body, although he has zero reason to be ashamed—he's all thick muscle and toned everything.

Unfortunately, I have never been toned or muscular in any fashion. "You are a woman," Karo states, turning his head to look over his shoulder at me. "A woman should be soft to the touch."

Rolling my eyes to the ceiling, I wonder if he is truly trying to annoy the absolute hell out of me or what. Because this conversation is literally about him reading my mind, and he's just done it again.

He bursts out laughing, then closes the door and turns fully to face me. I can't help myself. I lick my lips at the sight of his nakedness. I am annoyed with myself just as much as I am with him in this moment.

He makes his way toward me, climbing onto the end of the bed before he crawls up my body, his knees on either side of my legs and then hips, his palms resting on either side of my head, his elbows locked straight as he looks down at me.

"Your thoughts give me insight into what and how you think, Helmi. You are unlike any woman in my world, and I see this as a boon, a gift from the gods. I cannot simply turn it off, although I will endeavor not to do it often. Sometimes, your thoughts are so loud that I cannot help it. They come to me," he says before he dips his head and touches his lips to

mine. “I rather enjoy them, wife, and I feel as if I know you better because of them.”

I hate how much he makes sense with all of that, and I let out a sigh. “Okay,” I exhale. “Fine.”

“I love your soft body. It is beautiful and it is the home of my child, my heir. It is beauty personified.”

God. He’s so perfect.

“Not perfect,” he murmurs, touching his mouth to mine again. “Yours.”

And he is just that. Mine. I love it, too. I remember reading about all these horrible kings who would have a dozen women on the side. Children all over the place, and while I’m sure he could do that, I’m really grateful he isn’t that man. Then I realize that Lachlan and Percival aren’t either.

Maybe this is why we are the chosen ones to save the world. These men, they’re good ones. They’re kind and loving, loyal and honest. These are the men you want at your back and your side. This is why they were chosen by the gods. This is why they can and will defeat the underworld.

This.

Them.

These kings.

Chapter Thirty-Six

KARO

HOLDING OUT MY HAND, I WAIT FOR HELMI TO SLIP HER fingers into my palm, and I am not disappointed when she does. We've been bathed and dressed, and Helmi's hair has been replaited and beautifully adorned.

We are ready to dine this evening with our friends, all except the new parents, who are indeed consumed with their new prince. I can't help but think about the months to come and how, soon, I won't be dining at the table as I will have my own new prince to hold and gaze upon in wonderment.

We make our way down to the dining hall and walk straight toward our chairs. Everyone is here... except Ilta. The loss of her has not gone unnoticed. The *noita* sacrificed herself to save everyone in this room, in the world, and we should celebrate her.

I guide Helmi to her seat and pull it out for her, then make my way to my own. Everyone stands, their eyes on us. Reaching for my goblet, I hold it up and clear my throat.

"This evening, we have two very monumental things to celebrate. Both celebrations of life. Percival and Soleil have brought forth their new heir. A healthy boy to rule Katrauina. And we also celebrate the life of Ilta. The sacrifice she made to protect our world."

“Hear, hear,” Lachlan calls out. “To the new prince and Ilta.”

“To the new prince and Ilta,” I say in agreement.

We lift our glasses, then all of us take a sip. Only then do I sit down in my chair, the rest of the table following suit. The kitchen staff commences in bringing out the food as the chatter begins. Helmi turns to Neòil, both distracted with one another, so I take this opportunity to face Lachlan and Nilo, who are sitting on my other side.

“We must end this. Nilo, I believe you could be the answer.”

His eyes widen, although I don’t know if it’s because of the food that sits on his plate in front of him, likely things he’s never seen before, or if it is because he is the answer to ending this war.

“I am nobody’s answer. I still don’t believe that all of this isn’t some sort of elaborate dream I’m in. I’m sure I’ll be waking up any minute,” Nilo says.

Lachlan chuckles. “You sound like the women. They, too, believed this to all be fake, a dream, a nightmare, whatever it is they believed, but alas, it is not. This is real. Our world being in peril is very, *very*, real.”

“Real or not, I don’t know how to help you.”

“Magic,” I say. “You hold it. We have seen it in you. Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

Lachlan takes a piece of meat from his plate and brings it to his lips, his gaze searching Nilo’s, then mine, as he pops it in his mouth. He chews and swallows it before he speaks.

“I believe they will give us this night, but tomorrow, the war will be in full force. We should take shifts this evening, though I doubt any one of us will sleep restfully. Also, the new parents should have guards, no?”

I smile at Lachlan’s thoughts, mainly because they mirror my own. “They have ’round-the-clock guards, three switching

out every four hours so as not to have any with fatigue. I agree that we should stay awake in shifts.”

Lachlan’s lips curve up into his own smile. “The gods chose the three of us well, brother,” he murmurs as Timo rushes into the room.

He is breathing heavily, panting, his eyes wide as his gaze finds mine, then flicks to Lachlan’s before it finds mine again. I am on alert, attentive, and ready for what is to come, but when he speaks, I cannot fully understand his words, as they should not be said.

“Runo and Kenna are here,” he shouts.

Lachlan and I both stand slowly, although our bodies simultaneously sway. No doubt he is as surprised as I am to hear the news. There is no reason for them to be here.

They were told to stay away for at least six months.

It has not been even half that amount of time. The only purpose they could have for being back here already is not a good one. Lachlan and I abandon our food and head straight outside. I don’t bother looking to see if the women follow. I don’t need to because I can feel them at our heels.

Once we are outside, I expect to see them standing in the courtyard, but they are not. “They are at the shore, Your Highness,” Timo announces.

Before I can even demand that a horse be brought to me, I watch as my Clydesdale, another horse, and the horse-drawn buggy appear. Wordlessly, I mount my horse, Lachlan does the same, and I hear the women climb into the buggy.

With a shout, we move forward as a single unit. Lachlan and I ride faster than the buggy can go, our focus on our siblings and the possible dangers that could have transpired. I can’t help but think about the underworld and wonder if they were attacked.

It doesn’t take us long to reach the shore. Thankfully, my country is small, and it doesn’t take long to get anywhere. And since I’m the king, my castle is always near the shore for an easy getaway if we should ever be under siege.

Although, it's more likely to be attacked from within, being isolated the way we are. Tugging on the horse's reins, I bring him to a halt at the edge of the shoreline and wait for the small boat carrying Runo, Kenna, and a few of their guards to make its way toward us.

"They look okay from here," Lachlan rumbles beside me.

Nodding once, I clear my throat. "They do," I say as I dismount the Clydesdale.

Lachlan follows suit, and we walk toward the buggy as it arrives to help the women down. They appear as concerned as we are, but like us, they stay silent. Together, the four of us make our way to the water's edge to wait for the boat to arrive.

It doesn't take long, only moments, until their boat touches the shore. I watch as the guards jump out first, then Runo. He helps Kenna out of the boat, and together, they wade through the water at ankle height before they approach us.

I expect to find panic on their faces, perhaps pain, but instead, it's urgency. I know my brother, and he clearly has something he wishes to say or do immediately. Swiftly, they make their way toward us, only stopping when they're a few feet away.

"What's happened?" I demand.

Runo runs his fingers through his hair with a heavy sigh, then his gaze meets mine. His lips curve up into a smile. "We've had our fun, we've traveled, but we wanted to be home with our family."

Dipping my chin slightly, I look into his eyes. "Runo," I warn.

He shifts his gaze to Kenna, then meets mine again. "We missed you," he repeats.

Frowning, I look at Lachlan, who lifts his arms and crosses them over his chest as he watches me for a moment. He doesn't exactly speak, although he doesn't need to—his disapproving gaze says it all.

Jerking my chin, I take a step backward. “Get in the buggy. There is food at the house. You disrupted our dinner meal,” I grind out.

Runo lets out a bark of laughter. “I would say I’m sorry, but I’m not.”

Yes, I assume he is not, mainly because he is never regretful about anything he does. Although I know he is here for a reason. He would not defy my demands and return early for fun. He likely is here to help, unable to stay away from the action, but I need to know either way and then lecture him properly.

HELMI

WHEN WE PULL UP TO THE CASTLE, I AM SURPRISED THAT Runo and Kenna kept silent, not speaking a single word the entire way. It’s clear to me that there is a reason they came home early, and as much as I want to believe it’s because they missed all of us, I don’t think Runo would put Kenna’s life in danger *just because*.

Once we arrive in the courtyard, a stable hand hurries to take the horses, and another holds out his hand to help us down from the buggy. A few moments later, Lachlan and Karo arrive beside us. They give us their arms, which we happily take, then Runo and Kenna step forward as well.

Together, the six of us make our way into the castle and to dinner. Though the celebration has halted, I am surprised that Anja, Ferelith, and Nilo are still seated and waiting for us.

Nilo and Anja’s heads are tipped as they whisper to one another. I have no idea what they could be talking about, but they stop as soon as we walk into the room.

One of the kitchen staff steps through the doorway that leads to the kitchen and stops, her eyes finding Karo’s. “Shall I set two more places, Your Highness?” she asks with a small curtsy.

“Yes,” he grunts.

“Please,” I add, which causes Lachlan to chuckle.

She dips her chin, then turns and heads back to the kitchen. We all take our seats and begin to eat again as if there aren't two more people at the table. But it doesn't stay like that. It's clear that Lachlan and Karo are not going to accept their excuse of *missing us*, so they cut their trip short.

“Would you like to explain to us why you're here?” Karo asks once their food is brought from the kitchen.

“Well,” Runo begins.

But it's Kenna who touches his hand and shakes her head. “Let me,” she offers.

He dips his chin, his eyes shifting to her profile, and he doesn't look away. He's clearly enamored by her still, and I love that for them. It's clear this match is a love match. I also didn't think I would ever have a thought like that.

A love match.

I can't believe the world I'm living in and that I've already become so accustomed to it that the words *love match* don't bother me at all. In fact, I'm excited about it.

“It is a love match,” Karo murmurs beside me. “You don't do this in your world?” he asks.

“No,” Lachlan calls out before I can answer. “They do not do this in their world. Love matches, yes. They only marry for love.”

“That's not even what I said,” Neòil says. “I said some people are still matched that way, but in our country, it's not common.”

“Yes,” I agree softly. “There are people who are betrothed and have arranged marriages. Certain cultures, but in our country, it's not done often.”

“Either way, that doesn't matter right now,” Karo says, even though he's the one who brought it up in the first place. “Tell us why you're here now.”

Kenna dips her chin in a single nod before she begins to speak. When she does, I find she is brave, but I don't think the men will think the same as I do. I can almost feel the static in the room, the anger that begins to fill the space around us. Not just because they've put themselves in danger but also because they've defied not one but two kings' demands.

"We want to help," Kenna says. "We can't stay out in the ocean, visiting these beautiful countries while you're here fighting the underworld," she murmurs.

Lachlan growls, his gaze focused on his sister, but it's Karo who stands, slamming his hands down on the table as he peers across it at his brother.

Runo's cheeks stain red with embarrassment, maybe because he's let his wife speak, but more than likely because he knows he did something against his brother's will.

"Karo," Runo rasps.

"No," Karo growls. "Do you understand why we sent you away, truly?" he asks.

There is silence, then Runo opens his mouth, but it's Kenna who speaks. "You wanted to protect us, but you don't have to. We want to help."

Karo slams his hands down on the table again. "I do not care," he grinds out. "Shut the fuck up," he says, and my brother lets out a chuckle.

I blink a few times, unsure I've heard the word *fuck* come out of this man's mouth, but I don't have time to dwell on that because he continues.

"You are the heirs to two thrones by the gods. If we do not survive the underworld, you and your heirs are all that Maapallo and Sgaldachadh have. But now you're here, and we're all together. The fates of our countries rest on us defeating the underworld."

"Didn't the fates of the world always rely on you and your heirs, not on us? If the underworld is not defeated, that is the end of this life as we know it, so why does it matter if we die together or away from one another?" Kenna argues, her tone

unwavering. It's clear she has sparred with her brother more than once.

She has a point. I don't say that, though, because I have a feeling it would not go over well if I interjected in this moment.

"It matters not, Karo," Lachlan mutters. "As disappointed as we are in both of them, they are correct. It matters not. I would rather die with my sister by my side than not."

Karo is clearly angry. He slams his palms down on the table one last time before he takes his seat again. We continue eating, but the air around us is thick with worry. Until Karo sits back and lets out a grunt.

All eyes lift to meet his, and then his lips curve up into a smile. "I am glad to have you back, Runo and Kenna. Even if you defied everything your brother and I demanded, I am still happy to see the both of you."

It's as if the air around us takes a sigh just like we do. The rest of the evening is a true celebration of life. Ilta's life, the new prince's life. So much life. And two more lives that will make their way into the world in just months' time.

So much life and so much death.

I'm not sure what this life is about for me, what my purpose is here past this underworld business, but I can't deny I am beginning to love this place, this world. I have everything here other than my parents and, of course, modern conveniences, which I'm longing for less and less.

I like it here. I love my husband. I like this place. I think I've decided I want to stay.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

KARO

THE WOMEN LEAVE FOR BED, BUT SINCE WE'RE STAYING UP later to guard and watch for the underworld, it is a good time for the men to talk. We will all take our leave, but there are things we should discuss as kings and men. I've even invited Nilo to be part of the evening. I need to get to know my new brother, especially since it seems as if he is here to stay.

"What is happening?" Nilo asks, his eyes wide as he looks around my *toimisto*.

"We're going to play cards, perhaps chess, and drink," Lachlan announces.

"Guys' night?" Nilo asks, his brows lifting and his eyes widening as if he cannot believe we do this in our world.

Laughing, I jerk my chin in his direction. "Do they not do this in your world?" I ask.

"They do," he replies with a dip of his chin. "*Guys' night*. It's a thing. I'm just surprised you have it here, too."

He repeats the words as if he's thinking about a fond memory. I would ask him about it, but the conversation shifts and Lachlan begins to ask about Runo and Kenna's trip. They have been gone for months on their honeymoon, sailing around the world.

However, Runo is vague, and it makes me wonder if they ever even left their ship's cabin. I don't ask, mainly because

Lachlan is the bride's brother and that would be uncomfortable, to say the least.

“Do you believe Ferelith is correct in her assumption that the underworld will no longer send minions but will instead come up itself to fight us next?” I ask, my gaze flicking from each man before I glance down at the chessboard and make a first move.

There is a moment of silence when not a single man speaks. Then it's Nilo who does, and it surprises me, as he's only been here a few days. He obviously understands more of this than I have given him credit for. Although, to be fair, it's not as if any of us have truly navigated this before now.

Someone raps on the door, and we all pause at the sound of the knock, our heads turning to face it, waiting for what is on the other side to make itself known. Standing, I make my way over. Timo isn't here to answer as he normally would. I've sent him to watch over Helmi instead.

Opening the heavy wooden door, I am surprised, and yet at the same time not, to see a disheveled Percival standing on the other side.

“I was told you were here,” he murmurs.

Stepping aside, I allow him to pass, closing the door behind him before I ask him if he is all right. “Is anything amiss?” I ask.

Percival walks straight over to the decanter and pours himself a glass of liquor. I watch as he lifts the cup to his lips and takes a long drink before he hisses and turns to face us.

“I am well,” he announces. “But tired. The babe and mother sleep. I need a moment,” he says, his lips curved up as he lets out a chuckle. “Though, not too long, as I enjoy simply watching them together, but as I do, I worry about their safety.”

Yes.

Safety.

I cannot blame him for worrying about such a thing, as it is all I can think about, especially since the underworld sent a being into the birthing room to take the babe straight from the mother's womb.

This does not bode well for the future.

We cannot stay housed together like this for the rest of our lives. Something must be done, and this must be put to rest once and for all.

I bite my bottom lip, let out a sigh, and lower myself onto the chair as I stare at the chessboard in front of me but see nothing.

"I must admit that I am concerned about that as well. I cannot foresee them continuing this way for much longer. Not because they lack the strength, but because they are, without a doubt, impatient."

Lachlan chuckles. "They wish to take over this world immediately," he says.

"Indeed," Percival agrees with a grunt.

We are quiet for a long moment. Cards and chess pieces being moved are the only noises in the room other than us continuing to drink. Then Nilo stands from the card table and moves to the window.

I can feel the sea breeze as it washes through the space, the saltiness assaulting my senses. It is home to me, but I wonder what it is to Nilo.

I open my mouth to ask him why both he and Helmi stare out the window so often, but I'm cut off by the sound of something exploding. Nilo spins around, his eyes wide and his face ashen. Jumping to my feet, my body swaying with the drink, I frown, because I haven't had that much.

Turning to look at Lachlan, I open my mouth, but then everything becomes hazy. I can hear the men in the room shouting, but I can't hear anything else. It sounds as if I'm underwater. Every word that is said is muffled, and when I try to speak, nothing comes out.

Extending my arm, I reach out and try to grab hold of the side of the table as my knees grow weak. Turning my head, I watch as Lachlan collapses to the floor. Then Nilo does the same, and Percival.

I try to stay upright, but I cannot hold out. My body gives out, my legs collapsing, and as my shoulder slams onto the hard stone floor, my head bounces off it before everything goes completely dark.

This is how the underworld will win. They will take us out, render us completely incapable, and then they will make our women fight this alone. I send a prayer, a hope, up to the gods and ask for their help—beg for it.

HELMI

MY EYES OPEN, AND I SIT STRAIGHT UP, MY HEART RACING AS I suck in a breath and try to calm myself. I don't know what the noise was that woke me, but I'm awake, trying to catch my breath and terrified.

Glancing around the room, I look for the cause of the noise, but I am alone. Karo isn't even in bed yet. As I try to gather my wits and allow my eyes to adjust to the darkness of the room, I frown at the realization that my fire has gone out.

The only light I have to see what's around me is the glow from the moon, and although the moon and stars are much brighter in this world than my own, it's not that bright. After a few breaths, I throw my legs over the side of the bed to stand up. At the same time, the door flies open.

Timo stands on the other side, half in the hallway, half in the doorway, his eyes wide as he stares at me.

“Are you well?” he asks.

“What woke me?” I ask.

I can't deny that I'm a bit afraid to ask the question. With everything that's happened, with the magic, the good and the evil in this world, it could be anything. Timo's gaze flicks to his feet before it slowly meets mine.

“I know not. An explosion of some kind. We must gather the others.”

His words don't register immediately. My heart slams against my chest again, harder and faster than it did when I was startled awake. A single thought flashes through my head. The worry over two people in this castle, the most vulnerable two people.

Soleil and the baby.

Rushing to the wardrobe, I grab hold of my dressing gown and quickly slip it on, tying it beneath my breasts as I rush toward Timo. My hair is a wild mess, now down to my hips, but it doesn't matter. My focus is on Soleil and the baby.

As I arrive at their door, I am surprised to see Anja, Ferelith, Kenna, and Neòil rushing toward me. They appear to be in the same state of disarray as I am.

Timo takes a step forward, his hand on the handle of the door, and I start to tell him to knock first, but the way we were all awoken and because our initial reactions were the same, I'm wondering if this is where we're supposed to be.

Ferelith calls out Timo's name, and he stops. “Gather some soldiers. Find the men. We can do this. We must do this on our own.”

I don't know when she became the spokeswoman and leader of the group, but I'm glad for it because I am of zero use right now. Timo dips his chin in a single nod, his gaze sliding to mine, and I tilt my head to the side.

“You are in safe hands,” he murmurs.

“I am,” I whisper.

He nods his head a couple of times, then begins to move away from our small circle. “Soldiers will be here soon. I will find my king,” he announces, then he rushes away.

If Karo is anywhere in this castle, Timo will find him. But then another thought slaps me in the face. If Karo were anywhere in this castle, why isn't he here with me? With us? I

open my mouth to ask that because I know Lachlan is the same way. Why isn't he here? And Nilo?

I don't get the chance to ask because the door opens and I see Soleil holding her new baby, her eyes wide and tears streaming down her face.

Without another word, all of us rush into the room. Ferelith holds up her hands and closes her eyes.

"I have been saving this, but the time is now," she announces. "Gather around the bed."

We do as she demands, although we have no idea why. Thankfully, she is on our side because right now, I have a feeling we're going to need her. Before any of us can ask why we're surrounding the bed, she begins to chant something beneath her breath.

Reaching beside me, I take Soleil's hand in mine and squeeze it, pinching my eyes closed as warmth rolls throughout my entire body.

Then everything just stops.

Opening my eyes, I gaze across the room at Ferelith, who stands at the end of the bed, her head and shoulders slumped forward for a moment. We stare, unable to speak or even move. I feel as if I'm frozen in my place.

Slowly, Ferelith lifts her head, her eyes finding Soleil's. "The babe and all of you are protected."

"How?" Neòil asks.

Ferelith sinks down on the edge of the bed, her body appearing to be exhausted. I don't blame her. Whatever magic she wielded was powerful. I could feel it moving throughout my entire body.

"I don't have much left inside of me, so I've been saving the protection spell as an absolute last resort," she begins. "The baby and Soleil are too fragile to attempt to fight. They must be protected." Her gaze shifts and moves past each of us as she speaks. "They are here. I can feel them. That explosion

wasn't anything you could see. That was them entering our world from the underworld."

"Them?" I ask.

"The demons that have been awakened to take over."

"I want to know how they were awakened," Anja says.

It's clear she's just as confused as we are. According to these men, their ancestors married women who would keep the curses at bay for hundreds of years. Never deviating. And while we're from another world, it was thought we were chosen as their brides to maintain the status quo.

And yet, it has been anything but.

"It is just the time," Ferelith whispers.

I don't believe her. She appears to be exhausted, both physically and emotionally. I think there is more to this, but I don't know if we will ever find out the truth of it. So, instead of hounding her, I turn toward the other women.

"What do we do?" I ask.

Their expressions are as scared, worried, and shaken as my own. They offer me no answers, and I do the same in return. We have nothing. We can do nothing except wait. We can't leave Soleil, and she is not able to travel anywhere, so we must hunker down and fight right here with a drained witch by our sides and a healer with no actual powers.

It is just us now.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

HELMI

THE WORLD SEEMS TO BE ALMOST FROZEN AROUND US. I haven't heard from Timo. Ferelith is slumped over and resting, but I don't know if she's going to survive any of this. I don't want to lose her the way we did Ilta.

Too many people have already died or been hurt because of this.

As each minute passes, I can't help but think that something bad has happened to the men. To Karo and Nilo. All of them. Then I can't help but think about the demons, the evil entities and where they could possibly be.

If Ferelith is right and that explosion that woke us up was them coming here, then where are they? It's like we're sitting here waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for them to burst in through the door, and even then, it's not like we'll be ready for them.

Can you ever be ready for an evil entity to come in and try to kill you, steal your babies, and take over the world?

I think not.

Then it happens. The door blows open, even though I made sure it was completely shut the moment we rushed in here. There is no way it could blow open, and while we don't have actual glass on the windows, the wind could never come through that hallway, not like that.

So, as much as I want to tell myself it's just a little windstorm, I know exactly what it is. It's them. They're here, and at this point, there is no hiding or running from them. They want what they want, but we're not going to give it to them.

Not without a fight, at least.

Three people walk into the room. We're silent as we watch them, but when Soleil's hand squeezes mine, I know she's scared. I can't look away from them, though. My focus is on the three of them and only them.

"So, these are the women," the first one says, her voice a hiss as she takes a step forward.

If she weren't absolutely evil, I would compliment her style. She's wearing a super badass blue velvet cloak with gold trim. In fact, when I tilt my head to the side and squint, she looks a lot like Soleil.

My gaze scans the other two women, and I realize they're wearing the velvet cloaks of the colors of Neòil's and my country's as well. They look like us, too. The one in green even has hair as long as mine. It might be a little longer.

"What on earth?" I whisper to myself.

The one in blue locks eyes with mine. They're almost purple and so vibrant. I can't help but be mesmerized by them. They are absolutely out of this world. Clearly, she is, anyway, but her eyes are gorgeous.

"Not earth, my dear creature. The underworld, but we're home now."

Home.

Gross.

She lifts her hands, and I watch as she places her palms out and starts to murmur some words. Ferelith lifts her head and jumps to her feet as if she's been given a new lease on life. She faces the women and lifts her own hands, but she doesn't chant any spells. She just shouts one word.

"Stop."

I don't think the witches expect that. So, they do just that—they stop. They shift their attention from the three of us to Ferelith, who is only a few feet from them at the end of the bed. They all three jerk their chins as if seeing her for the first time.

Their focus had only been on me, Soleil, Neòil, and the baby. They didn't even realize Anja and Ferelith were in the room. This sucks because they could have maybe used that to their advantage had we known.

“Stop?” the woman in blue asks. “I think not. Your magic is gone. You are worthless. We could kill you with a single word. I would tread lightly.”

Oh, what a bitch.

“What do you want?” I ask.

I pretty much know exactly what she wants, what they want, but I'm trying to deflect all of this, hoping to buy some time for the men to get here. Wherever they are. I hope they make it here soon, but then again, I'm not sure what these women are going to do, so maybe they should stay away.

“We want your babies.”

“But why?” Neòil asks.

The one wearing a bloodred velvet cape turns her head to face Neòil, her lips curving up into a menacing smile, and I can't help but shrink back at the expression she wears. She looks seriously terrifying.

With the chill that slides up my spine, I shift my attention to the one who looks more like me, the ringleader, and I really take her in. She doesn't look as much like me in the face as I thought she did at first glance.

Sure, it's clear we share a lot of the same attributes, but she doesn't look like my twin the way Meri did. She just has long blonde hair like mine, the same color eyes, and about the same build. Her face isn't exactly like mine, though. It's not like any human's. It's clear she is different.

“If we don’t, then we cease to exist. This world is ours for the taking, but there is a time limit on that. It’s not as if it matters to you because soon, you will be the ones who cease to exist.”

Sinking my teeth into the soft skin on the inside of my cheek, I watch them for a moment. Then I send a plea up to the gods for help. This cannot go down this easily.

I refuse.

I know the women in this room refuse as well. The problem is that we’re not the only ones fighting for our lives. So are these creatures.

KARO

I’M NOT SURE HOW LONG I STAY OUT. BUT I SUCK IN A DEEP breath as I sit up and look around. My head aches from hitting the floor, but I am exactly where I was when I fell, which is good. Pushing myself onto my feet, I clear my throat as I take in the room.

The other men are still down. I try to move, my feet shuffling toward a chair. Reaching out, I wrap my fingers around the hard wood at the back of the chair and sink down with a groan. I hear someone stir on the floor and tip my chin down to look at Lachlan, who moans.

He opens his eyes and pushes himself up to a seated position, his eyes finding mine. “What’s happened?” he asks.

Shaking my head, I lift my hand to my forehead and let out a grunt before I speak. “I don’t know. I think we were poisoned or cursed.”

Then my own words play on repeat, and I realize what I’ve just said. What happened? Standing on my shaky legs, I walk to the door and tug it open just in time to see Timo rushing toward me.

“There you are,” he says, his breaths coming out in pants.

“Here I am,” I agree, my lips turning down in a frown. “What’s happened?” I demand.

Timo places his palms on his thighs as he bends slightly and attempts to catch his breath. He doesn't say anything immediately. He lifts his head, his eyes finding mine, and then he slowly stands up straight and lets out a sigh.

"Well," he says, "there was the sound of an explosion. The women all woke up and ran to Soleil's chamber. They sent me to look for you."

"They sent you to look for us?" I ask. He isn't telling me everything. I narrow my gaze on him. He shakes his head. "Ferelith said that the explosion was the underworld coming up from its home."

"Soleil and the baby," Percival barks, and I watch as he practically springs up from the floor.

Reaching out, I throw my arm across his chest before he can run toward the door. Turning to him, I lift my hands and wrap my fingers around his shoulders. "Do not run into that room with them yet. We need our shields first."

"Shields," Lachlan mutters.

Once we're all on our feet, all of us except Nilo, who is sitting with his legs crossed in the middle of the floor, Lachlan rushes out of the room. I know he's going for our shields, all of which were put into the weapons room, which is just a few doors down in this same hallway.

A few moments later, Nilo is on his feet, and the shields are being carried in by Lachlan. Three of them. They are the only magic we possess, and I'm not sure it is enough to hold back the demons of the underworld.

Turning to Nilo, I jerk my chin in his direction. "Stay behind our shields. We don't know what we're going to be walking into," I warn.

He nods his head once, then falls in line behind us. Timo does the same. Shifting my attention to Runo, I frown. "Do not be brave," I growl.

He's got his fingers curled around the hilt of his sword and is ready to fight. But that is the last thing I want him to do. I

open my mouth to tell him that, but he shakes his head once. His eyes find mine and they are focused—*determined*.

“I won’t do anything stupid. But I’m not going to stand here like a fool and wait.”

“Just watch your back,” I mutter.

Together, we move out of the *toimisto* and head straight for Percival and Soleil’s chamber. We move as one unit, just like in battle. I am happy to serve beside these men. All of them have my respect.

“Timo,” I call out. “Did you gather any of the men?”

“I did. They are outside, guarding the castle.”

“Good,” I say. “They would just cause chaos being inside with us.”

It doesn’t take us long to reach the chamber. The door is closed. I reach for the handle and suck in a breath, unsure of what is going to greet me on the other side, and I push the door open. There are three cloaked figures with their backs to me.

Deep blue, bloodred, and emerald green.

We move into the room before they turn around to face us. I’m a bit taken aback as they appear to look like our queens. They aren’t their exact replicas, but from a distance, you would not know the difference.

This is probably why this is happening here and now and didn’t happen a hundred years ago or a hundred years from now. Everything has aligned just right. I don’t open my mouth to speak. Not a single word is needed. They know who we are, and we know who they are.

They are the demons of the underworld here to take over, control, and consume the world. They will cause havoc, they are cruel, and they will enjoy all the pain they bring to the world. These are some of the many reasons they cannot win this fight.

I love you, Karo. I just wanted to tell you before we died.

My eyes widen, and my attention shifts from the demons to my wife. She is standing beside Soleil and her babe, a grasp on Soleil's hand as her eyes are focused on mine. Dipping my chin, I give her a wink to show her that I heard her.

But I do not speak.

"It's almost as if you are all wishing to die," the demon in the blue cloak says as she takes a step toward me.

"Three things in this room will die and go back to where they came from, but it won't be us," I reply.

She smiles. Her eyes turn white as she moves toward me. She stops when she's about two feet away, leaning forward, her snowy eyes focused on mine. They don't bother me. I'm sure she's attempting to be intimidating.

It doesn't work.

With my sword in one hand and the shield in the other, I decide to take the plunge. Lifting my sword, I bury it in her middle. It does nothing except make her smile even larger. I knew it would not do anything except what it did, which is exactly what I wanted.

It causes a distraction.

And then a moment of chaos.

Nilo, Runo, and Timo rush toward the women. Lachlan, Percival, and I stand guard, attempting to protect the women while keeping the demons from leaving. We block the doorway, our shields lifted, our swords ready. I'm not sure how we're going to beat these things, these creatures, but I know we will try everything to win, even if it kills us.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

HELMI

GRIPPING SOLEIL'S HAND TIGHTLY, I WATCH AS THE MEN RUSH into the room and brace for war with these demon witches.

Nilo, Runo, and Timo hurry to our sides, although I'm not sure if it's to help protect us, to stay out of the way, or in hopes of us protecting them with our magic. I reach out with my free hand, and Nilo grabs hold of it.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Me? Are you okay?"

There is a moment of silence, and I almost tear my gaze away from the demon witches and the kings, but I can't. My attention is fully focused and given to them as they stare one another down.

It is definitely a battle of the ages, and it's going to happen right here in front of me. I don't think I want to witness it, although I don't think I'll have a choice. I'm going to be forced to see it all, right here, in bright flowing lights and all.

"We passed out, all of us like it was some kind of spell or poisoning or something. We're good now."

Pressing my lips together, I frown as I think about that. "Poison?" I ask, my voice trembling with the word.

"Poison," Runo grunts. "Sleeping potion or something. It wore off quickly, but perhaps we didn't drink enough of it. We

didn't have the chance."

My lips curve up into a grin. "Well, thank goodness for that," I whisper.

He snorts but doesn't say anything else. Nothing else needs to be said or can be because I hear Karo's voice. It's a loud boom, and my spine straightens.

"Three things in this room will die and go back to where they came from, but it won't be us," he says.

The demon witches lift their hands at the same time and let out a shrill sound, a screech that sounds like the beings they sent earlier. The men lift their shields, covering their bodies as best they can.

Clutching Nilo and Soleil's hands, I close my eyes and send Karo a silent message, hoping he is able to hear me through the shrill screeching.

We will win. We will win. I love you, Karo. We must win.

I say the words, chanting them over and over, hoping this is what will help us somehow. I'm not sure it will, even though I really want it to. Nilo's fingers flex around my fingers, and it breaks my chanting.

I look at him. He's got a silly grin on his face, but I don't understand what he could be smiling about. He leans over, his lips pressed to the shell of my ear before he speaks.

"Place the baby in the middle of the bed. We should hold hands surrounding it. I think the baby, with us around it, that is the power we need."

He could be wrong. He could be right. But the simple fact is that none of us know what would and would not work. I turn to Soleil. She has the baby clutched to her chest, tears streaming down her face, helpless, defenseless. A brand-new mother with no way to protect herself against these evil entities.

Her attention slowly shifts to me, her eyes finding mine, and then, as if there is an unspoken moment between us, she dips her chin in a nod. The baby cries, the sounds of the

demon witches being too loud for anyone, especially that of a newborn baby.

I watch as she places him down in the middle of the bed, then reaches out and takes Neòil's hand. And then, each of us takes one another's hands while Runo and Timo move to the side, although I do notice that they do not go far from the baby.

They are both within arm's reach.

We all focus our attention on the demon witches, who are not paying us any mind at all. In fact, their notice is only on the kings and nobody else. I hope Karo can hear my thoughts because we are going to try to harvest some serious magic.

Ferelith dips her chin in a single nod, then we all close our eyes and hope for the absolute best outcome. I don't know what is going to happen or why, but I am right here, ready for it. I inhale a deep breath and squeeze Soleil's and Nilo's hands.

The moment my fingers flex, I feel the warmth fill me. It flows through my veins, deep in my belly, before it bursts out of my chest.

And it does.

With a gasp, I open my mouth, though no other sounds come out. I'm too awestruck by what I'm seeing to actually say anything. All of us have light pouring out of us, and I don't know why, but I expect it to find its way to the demon witches, but it doesn't.

We're standing in a circle around the bed, the baby in the middle, and the light shoots up, colliding in the center above the bed, almost like a canopy. I'm not sure what I expect it to do, but it continues to build, almost creating a cloud in the air over the center of the bed.

I look at the demon witches at the same time, all three of their heads swiveling to watch us. It's the most disturbing thing I think I've ever seen. My breath is stolen from my body, but only momentarily.

My focus shifts back to the circle, to protecting the baby, to the magic above us.

“Arms up together,” Ferelith calls out.

One of the demons starts to shriek. It sounds like it’s moving closer to us, but I can’t look over. I have a feeling that Ferelith’s instructions aren’t supposed to be done on our own time. So, instead of looking at those witch bitches, I raise my head and look up at the mass of light that is floating above us.

That light, those colors, it’s a bright white-ish yellow, then, as if something shifts, I watch as each color of our lands comes from each of us queens—blue, red, and green mix together, with bright white at the center.

That bright white light in the center forms a ball. The shrieking grows even louder. I can’t even hear myself think. It becomes difficult to concentrate, but I know that is what they are attempting to accomplish by being so damn loud.

The ball above us, I wait for it to do something, anything, but it doesn’t. It grows. Larger and larger, hovering above us. I frown, wishing it would do something and hoping whatever this ball does, it does it to them.

To those shrieking, annoying-as-shit demon bitches.

Then it happens.

KARO

MOVING FORWARD, WE HOLD OUR SHIELDS HIGH AS WE TRY TO take advantage of the demon witches being distracted by the women and their lights. Silence surrounds us for a moment. The screeching ceases, and I take that moment to shift my attention to the light.

There is a large ball of white light being formed in the center of the bed, above the infant prince. I’m not sure what it is, but it is coming from the women and Nilo, gathered in a circle, holding hands.

It is magic.

“We must get them. Now,” Percival hisses.

He is not in the least distracted by the white ball of bright light. He is focused, and I aim to be more like him. So, with a jerk of my head, I move toward the witches. Dropping the shields to our sides, the three of us, armed with only our three swords, charge them.

The white ball explodes just as we thrust our swords directly into the torsos of the damned. The light blinds us, none of us knowing exactly what's happened. A baby cries out in the background. The shrill screeching has ceased. And then there is nothing else. Just the crying of a newborn babe.

Dropping to my knees, unable to stand after the flash of light, I lift the shield to cover my face. I try not to appear weak. However, the light is too bright and the silence is almost deafening, or perhaps my ears are permanently damaged from all the screeching that has been going on for near on an hour.

Removing the shield from my face and body, I stand and look straight ahead, hoping to see dead demons on the floor at my feet, but alas, there are no bodies. Not a single one. My head quickly pivots to the side, the bed coming into view, and I count the people standing there.

I see Runo and Kenna, Soleil holding the baby, who suckles for comfort at her breast, Nilo, Ferelith, Anja, and then Neòil. The only person I do not see is the one I wish to gaze upon the most.

Helmi.

My wife.

Rushing toward the bed, I call out her name. Nilo's eyes find mine, and he begins to call out Helmi's name as well. It's when my frantic gaze finds Ferelith's that I know something bad has happened, although I'm unsure of what it could be, and I refuse to believe it could possibly be anything too nefarious.

Ferelith closes her eyes without a single word. There is still chaos happening around us. Percival checking on his wife and babe. Lachlan, ensuring that his wife and unborn babe are safe. Runo and Kenna hold one another while Kenna cries.

Nonetheless, Ferelith extends her hands, her palms facing the ceiling as she closes her eyes and tips her head backward. I hear her mutter some words I do not understand, and then she is shrouded in a light-blue light for just a split second before it is gone and she rights her head, her eyes opening and finding mine.

“She is alive.”

“I thought this room was protected?” Percival growls.

Ferelith doesn't even look at him. Her eyes are focused on mine and only mine as she answers him, although I believe she is also answering my unasked questions, which are *why and how?*

“I can protect against their minions. I cannot completely protect against the underworld beings themselves. I am strong. However, I am not as strong as a god, and that is what they are. Albeit they are gods of the underworld, but gods just the same.”

She sucks in a breath, then her gaze focuses on mine again. “I know not her exact location, but Helmi is alive.”

“How do we find her?” I demand. “Now.”

She shakes her head once, then her gaze flies to Nilo, who is standing beside Anja, his hand on the small of her back as their heads are dipped and they murmur to one another. “Nilo,” Ferelith calls out.

His head lifts quickly, his eyes finding mine, and then he releases Anja and takes a step forward as if to give his verbal recognition of his name being called. Ferelith lifts her hand, her palm facing him, but then shakes her head as if that isn't good enough for whatever it is she's looking for.

I watch as Ferelith closes the distance between them, placing her palm in the center of Nilo's chest. She takes a deep breath in, then lets it out slowly. Once, twice, three times before she opens her eyes and slowly turns her head, craning her neck to the side before she speaks.

“She is in a turret room. A tower somewhere. Although I cannot pinpoint the exact location.”

“Is she in the country?” I demand.

“Yes, she is here in Maapallo.”

She wouldn't be at the same tower where they hid her away the first time. That would be too easy. She would be hidden, shrouded in magic. I press my lips together and roll them a few times before I release them.

“Can you do a spell of some kind to uncover her? I know she is likely hidden in a tower somewhere behind a barrier. They would not put her anywhere visible.”

Anja takes a step forward. Surprisingly enough, it seems as though she has something to offer in this conversation, which surprises me as she is a *tietäjä* and not a witch. But I do not interrupt her in any way but wait for what she is going to add.

“Nilo can find her. They share blood. He is connected to her in a way nobody else here is.”

As much as I want to be angry that it's Nilo who shares a bond with my own wife, I know it is true. They are siblings. They share blood, and while my child grows inside of her, that bond is not as strong yet as it will one day be.

For now, the gods have brought Nilo here, giving him magic and a connection to Helmi that I don't have yet.

“Then find her,” I demand.

Chapter Forty

HELMI

ONCE THE BRIGHT LIGHT FADES, I REACH MY HAND OUT FOR Soleil's, but I don't feel her. I turn my head in her direction and open my eyes, but there is nothing except an empty bed that meets my gaze.

Touching the floor, I feel the hard stone I'm sitting on and force myself to stand, my legs trembling as I walk toward the single window. I don't know geographically where I am, but I know exactly *where I am*.

I am in a tower.

Again.

Walking to the window, I grip the ledge and look out. The ocean greets my gaze, and I wonder if that dragon will swoop in and save me. I haven't seen it in a while, so it's not impossible it could pop back here.

Frowning, I know it won't happen. I am likely hidden away here by those evil witch bitches, and I would venture to guess that if anyone walked by, they probably wouldn't even see us here. I'm going to assume there is some sort of spell that would make all this invisible.

At that thought, the door flies open and slams against the curved stone wall. I spin around, hoping to see it swing back closed and slam into the women's faces, but it doesn't, unfortunately.

I stare at them, wondering what they're going to do to me. I have a feeling this won't be the same as it was the last time I was kidnapped and shoved into a tower. But also, why am I always put in a tower?

It's the weirdest thing ever.

The head witch moves forward, but she doesn't walk. She floats. I blink as I watch her. I could have sworn she was walking earlier, but it's clear now that she is floating, and that freaks me out completely.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I try to keep from showing any sort of emotion. I would assume that women like this, evil underworld entities, would thrive on any negativity or fear, and I refuse to give them that kind of power.

"Since you couldn't take the already-born baby, you decided to be cowards and kidnap me and hold me here until my baby is born?" I ask.

The one who looks like Soleil tilts her head to the side, her hollow eyes finding mine, and holds my gaze for a moment. I refuse to back down or be intimidated by her, so I keep my shoulders square and stare at her, waiting for her to speak.

"You do realize that when this is finished, we will be in the kings' beds, right?"

Again, as much as I want to give her a reaction, I refuse. "Oh, you'll be with a mere mortal? How quaint."

"And you'll be dead," she growls. "These babies are the key to power. They will be ours."

"Here I thought you were going to let our husbands go, yet you tell me you're going to keep them? Do you even know what you're going to do?" I ask.

I'm egging her on, hoping she'll lose her shit, and then... and then... and then I don't know what, but it's all I've got in the moment. She doesn't lose her cool, though, not in the slightest. Instead, she smiles, and it's creepy as shit.

The stare-down doesn't last long. In fact, she spins around, turns her back to me as she moves out of the doorway, then the

other two follow suit behind her. All three stop and the head bitch turns her head, looking over her shoulder at me.

“That’s the thing with us,” she says as she lifts her hand and twirls it in the air. “We don’t have any rules to follow anymore. We weren’t going to keep the men, but after further consideration, we’ve decided we want them, so we’ve changed our minds.”

They leave the room cackling, then the door slams shut, and I know there’s no reason for me to check and see if it’s locked. It is. I know it is. They would not leave anything unlocked for me to roam around. Besides, I already know from the last time I was locked in a stupid tower that there’s really nowhere to go.

I could sit on the floor and cry, I could lie in bed and cry, or I could walk to the window and stare at the ocean. I choose the ocean. At least while looking at the water, I can think about other things aside from this tower. I can think about Karo, about losing him, and about having my baby stolen from me.

Pushing away from the ledge, I spin around and face the door again. This is a nightmare, one I don’t honestly think I’ll ever wake up from. I think this might be the end of it all for me. I’m not sure I’m going to find a way out of this.

Closing my eyes, I send a loud thought to Karo, hoping and praying he can hear me. I don’t think he can. I’m sure these witches have made it impossible to communicate with him in any way.

I give up for the day. My body is weak and exhausted from exerting my magic, from creating life, from everything that’s happened in this single day, let alone the last few months. Walking over to the bed, I sink down on the edge, my feet dangling over the side, and stare at the stone floor.

I won’t be living much longer. I know I won’t. My hair falls over my shoulder, and I touch the braid, feeling the silken smoothness of it. I wonder what would happen if I cut it off. It’s grown at a rate of speed that isn’t normal. Is it magical or something?

Lying down on the bed, I kick my shoes off before I fully stretch out. The pillow is soft beneath my head, the ceiling round and beautiful like every other tower I've been in. I hate it. Every single part of it.

I want to be home with Karo.

I realize that I thought of the castle with Karo as home. But it is. That's exactly what it is—home. This is my world now. I'm at peace with it. I will always miss my parents and other family members, but I have Nilo here with me now.

Nilo.

My being here means he's all alone there. Guilt consumes me. I wanted to have him here with me so badly. Selfishly, I wanted to pull him away from his life and into our world, and now I'm gone and probably won't ever make it back.

I haven't even had a chance to tell him what desserts are good and which ones taste horrible. There are a lot of things I don't know about this place myself. I hate that. I'm supposed to be a queen here, and yet I know nothing about any of it.

Rolling onto my side, I stare at the wall and wait.

And wait.

I exhale a long sigh and wait a little longer. Because, in the end, it doesn't matter. Nothing does. I'll lie here until I birth this baby. They'll take it from me and kill me. They are holding me hostage here. I've only been able to use my magic when I'm with the others.

So I am stuck here, at their mercy.

Waiting for my baby to be taken from my body.

Waiting for them to kill me.

Waiting.

KARO

WE DON'T LEAVE PERCIVAL AND SOLEIL'S SIDE. IN FACT, I have a feeling we will all camp out here as though we are on a

trip and have no shelter. However, I cannot imagine walking away from them, not after what happened, not with what *could* happen.

Nilo walks to the window and stares out while Ferelith consults a book she's produced from her chamber. She turns the pages, her eyes scanning each one as she attempts to find the spell that will help us rid the earth of the underworld demons and bring Helmi home.

I open my mouth to ask Ferelith if she's yet to find anything but snap my lips shut, deciding not to ask anything. There is nothing needed from me. This is her specialty, although I am finding the waiting process tedious.

"I think I've possibly found something," Ferelith mutters, almost so low I do not hear her.

"What's that?" I ask.

"The spell that will at least get Nilo to her. Then we can go from there."

Nilo turns and looks over his shoulder, his eyes finding Ferelith's. "What would I do there?" he asks.

"I can put a tracking spell on you, hopefully," she mutters.

I want to believe her, but this all sounds far too good to be true. There is no way it could work out this easily. I don't like the sound of it at all. In fact, I decide I don't like any of it. Taking a step forward, I open my mouth to speak, but Nilo beats me to it.

"And then what?" he asks, taking the words from my mouth.

"Then we beat them," Ferelith simply states.

I let out a bark of laughter. "How?"

As much as I want to believe that we will win this fight, considering they've taken my wife more than once now, and both times right in front of me, I am not the most confident in our future victory.

Nobody speaks except Lachlan, who takes a step forward. “We seduce them,” he offers. “They’re after babies and us. We act as though we will give that to them. And then we kill them.”

“How do you kill a god?” I ask. “Because that is what they are, dark gods but still gods. How do you kill a god?”

None of us knows. We all shift our attention to Ferelith and watch her with anticipation. I hold my breath, waiting to hear if she has an answer. There is nothing. At least not immediately. She shifts her gaze to the ceiling, then dips her chin and looks down at the floor for a moment. I count her breaths.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Slowly, she lifts her head, her eyes flicking around from person to person before they finally land on mine.

“We need weapons from the gods.”

That’s *fucking* useless, as Nilo would say. Instead of saying that, I decide she needs to handle this. There are three kings standing over her, and she’s just now given us this information, something that she should have done and worked on previously.

“Then you better figure out a way to get some weapons from the gods,” Lachlan barks, taking the words right out of my mouth.

And she better, or I have a feeling it will be her life. Because if Lachlan doesn’t follow through with the murderous look on his face, I will. I don’t even have to look at Percival to know he is feeling the same way.

“I thought we could beat them with the women,” she whispers. “Why would the gods bring them together here, break the curse, and then not give them a way to prevail?”

I don't disagree with the *noita*. It is not logical. Why would the gods bring the women here, giving them powers but not the ability to actually succeed in ridding our world of the evil gods of the underworld?

And yet... It's happened just that way.

Leave it up to the gods to play tricks.

Pressing my lips together, I stare at the witch and wonder what is to come next. She has her orders, although I'm unsure if she will be able to complete the task. I can see the doubt in her gaze.

"I will try," she exhales.

That is not good enough for any of us. Again, Lachlan speaks first, saying exactly what I'm thinking and no doubt what Percival is thinking as well.

"There is no trying. This is our world. These are our queens and heirs. You will do it."

Chapter Forty-One

HELMI

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I LIE ON MY SIDE, STARING AT THE wall. But eventually, I sleep.

When I do, I dream.

Thoughts of Karo fill my mind.

Beautiful thoughts about the family we have, a boy and three girls before a final boy. I never imagined so many children in my life, but the smile on my slightly older face is, without a doubt, the purest joy I've ever witnessed.

Then there is Karo. His eyes crinkle at the sides. His hair is almost completely gray, but his body is still firm and strong, albeit a bit thicker. He looks amazing, handsome, and very much like a dream come true as he holds one daughter in his arms and another by the hand.

I let out a sigh, my eyes flutter open, and I turn to tell him about the dream. That's when I realize I'm not in bed with him but in this stupid magical tower thing. Instantly, anger fills me, and I have to tamp it down.

Yes, I am angry with the evil dark witches, but I also think that if I allow my anger to not only fill my body but also manifest inside of me, it will somehow feed these beings. I refuse to help them in any way whatsoever.

I breathe in deeply as I push myself up to a seated position. Walking over to the bathing room, I curl my lip at the sight of

the hole that I know is just a glorified porta-potty and a single basin for washing.

Running water would be amazing right about now. I do my business, wash myself as best I can, and walk back into the room. A single bedroom and bathing room, nothing else, just like I had before, except this seems much more dismal. Maybe because it's happened again, it keeps happening.

It's like I have been cursed.

Frowning, I glance toward the window, then shift my attention back to the door.

A curse.

This whole thing is a curse. I think about Meri and how she was kept in a tower to assuage said curse. How I was, supposedly, supposed to come here by order of the gods. That the curse was already set into motion by Soleil and Neòil being here, but also that we are the saviors.

Can the curse be the cure?

Or did we just come here to die?

Is what's happening now supposed to happen? Is that the destiny? I am so sick and confused, disgusted with everything, and so in love with my husband that my heart hurts to be away from him this way.

Thunder in the distance causes my spine to straighten. I walk to the window and look out to see if I can catch a glimpse of the storm, but it is clear. Searching the sea, I look for a sign of life, anything at all, but the water is all I see.

I take in the bright colors and think of how, not long ago, they left me feeling at peace just by gazing at them. But they don't do that right now. Now, all I see is loneliness. There is nothing around us. Not a single thing. The ocean, some small grassy hills, but nothing else. No buildings, no people, no animals.

And it's then I realize I'm nowhere on the actual earth. I'm hidden somewhere, maybe down in the underworld. Nothing is real. The way the waves move in and out perfectly, the exact

same way each time. They aren't real. It's like I'm in a movie that is green-screened.

There is a noise at the door, and I spin around, bringing up my eyes. I watch the three witch bitches move through the door. They are smiling, their faces appearing even odder than usual. I don't know what they are thinking, why they seem so thrilled with themselves, or what, but I don't care, either.

I wish I had magic and could lift my hands and send them flying across the room and into the stone wall in the hallway, but I can't just call that up and make it happen.

So I don't.

Instead, I stay silent, watching them, trying to put all the puzzle pieces together. Although I'm still completely lost in this place and have no idea what's happening, what I do know is that I'm not in the world above. I'm below, and that makes this a million times worse.

"It is time for you to meet *him*," the head girl announces.

I knew it.

I just knew it.

"I don't think I want to," I say. "I'm perfectly content locked in my tower until the end."

I know what the end is. There's no reason to pretend there isn't an end on the table. I know that as soon as my baby is born, I'll be of no use to them at all whatsoever. So, until then, I think I'll just stay right here.

"*He* does not like to be refused," the bloodred-caped girl announces.

Again. I do not care.

"I'm sure he doesn't, whoever *he* is. But I like where I am. Thanks, though."

Apparently, they do not want to play games for another moment longer. Defying all gravity or anything that resembles a normal anything, my back arches, and I rise off the floor,

floating, before I am moved forward and stop directly in front of the women.

The head one smirks. “You do not have a choice. Call it forced compliance.”

“Time to go,” she states.

Without another word, I am levitated and literally fly away, out of the room, down the hallway, down the stairs, and then to another doorway. I am not naive enough to believe this doorway is going to lead to the great outdoors. I know this leads to *him*, whoever he is.

When the head bitch knocks, I know for sure this is someone big. All of this, every single part of it, confirms I am not above. Where Karo can find me. I am in the depths of hell. At least, that’s what I’m going to assume this place is.

“Enter,” a deep voice growls.

It sounds scary as hell. And honestly, I don’t want to see what belongs to that voice because I’m pretty positive it’s not human. But I don’t have a choice. The evil witch bitches sally forth and bring me along for the ride.

As soon as I am hauled into the room, I am assaulted by the sight of it. If this is a god, I want no part of them at all. He’s relaxing in a tall-backed chair, just like you would assume a devil would be, his arms on the rests, his glowing bright-yellow eyes meeting mine.

He smiles, tilting his head to the side. His look is more like scales, his features more serpentine than human. He crosses his legs, then uncrosses them and stands. I watch as he begins to move toward me. He sashays with each step, very much like slithering.

The evil witch bitches step aside to let him move closer to me. They still have control of my body, and that fact makes me sick to my stomach. Lifting my head, I look down my nose at him, refusing to give him any reaction at all, although I’m not sure how good I am at hiding it.

He doesn’t need words, apparently, or maybe he just doesn’t care about saying anything because he’s used to taking

and doing what he wants as an evil entity thing.

He leans forward, his tongue snaking out. It's forked and everything. Closing my eyes, I wait for what I imagine is a cold, wet tongue to touch me, but it doesn't happen.

In fact, the sound of shrieking fills the air, and my eyes open just in time to see a bright white light shining. It's blinding, and I know it is my people coming to save me. I don't know who, but I don't really care at this point.

I just want to go home.

KARO

IT FEELS LIKE A LIFETIME HAS GONE BY. I PACE THE CHAMBER, refusing to leave Percival, Soleil, and the baby. Nilo, Lachlan, Neòil, Runo, Kenna, and Timo stay as well. Anja and Ferelith have gone off to conjure the gods.

Hopefully, at the very least, they'll find a weapon to defeat whatever those women are and whatever else stands between us and Helmi.

When the door to the chamber opens, I watch as Ferelith and Anja rush into the room, closing the heavy door behind them. "I think we have it," she shouts.

I open my mouth to ask them what but snap my lips closed as Ferelith continues. "We have a spell, but we all have to be here together. We can use our magic to call on the gods and ask for their help. I don't know for sure that it will work, but it's what we've found."

"Then let's do it," I say.

"It's ancient," she continues. I don't know if she's trying to deter us from agreeing to this, but it doesn't matter to me.

Lachlan takes a step forward, his gaze focused on hers, and I realize how much respect I have for this man in that instant. He's been vocal but hasn't tried to take anything over. He is very much a king who respects the fact that this is my home, my kingdom, my castle, but he also cares for his sister and his wife a great deal.

I make a mental note that when this is all over, we'll travel to Sgaldachadh for a holiday.

"Is there an issue with the spell?" he asks, taking the words from my mouth. "Does it matter that it is ancient or not? Aren't all spells ancient?"

Anja clears her throat. We all watch her and wait. I hold my breath, wondering what she's going to say because it's clear she is ready to explain something. She takes a step forward, her eyes flicking from Lachlan to me, then she swallows loudly before she speaks.

"It is not simply about the spell being ancient. It is more that it is dangerous. There is a reason it hasn't been performed in centuries," she murmurs.

"And that is?" I ask more out of curiosity than caution.

Her lips curve up into a grin. "Because, King, calling the gods is not a simple measure. You do not get to choose which god will come to your aid... or peril."

"It matters not," I say, lifting my hand and waving it around. "It matters not because this is a desperate situation."

Anja dips her chin. "I agree," she whispers.

Ferelith sucks in a loud breath, holds it, then releases it slowly. "Then let us begin," she whispers.

She moves toward the bed, and the rest of us follow. I feel bad for Soleil, who has a whole village's worth of people in her birthing chambers, but she only smiles and does not complain about the inconvenience.

"Gather around, and we will hold hands again. It's the only way it will work, but this time, I need everyone," Ferelith urges.

Everyone.

We gather, holding hands. Soleil places the sleeping newborn in her lap as she takes Percival's hand on one side and Neòil's on the other.

"Close your eyes," Ferelith instructs.

We do, and then she begins chanting. I don't try to understand what she is saying. It matters not. My focus is on getting to my bride. My wife. My queen. Saving her is all that matters. Nothing else does in this moment.

There is a loud crack of thunder, and we all jump, our hands being forced apart. My eyes pop open immediately. Spinning around, I look over to see three people standing behind us. Several from our group gasp, but I can't tear my gaze from these people.

They are bigger and brighter than any human I've ever seen before. Pressing my lips together, I cross my arms and tilt my head to the side. They do not give me any ill feelings or anxiety. Instead, I feel a sense of calmness rush through me, although I do not show the expression.

"You called on us, using a spell that was long forgotten," one of the men announces, taking a step forward.

I don't let Ferelith speak. I take the initiative since this is my home, my people, and my wife is the one who has been taken.

"We would like to beat the demons of the underworld, but gods do not die by simple swordplay," I say.

The gods turn their heads, looking at one another, then shift their attention back to us. "You wish to have weapons from the gods to defeat them?"

"We do," Lachlan grinds out.

"The weapons you shall have," the man in front says.

"Perhaps they wish to know where Queen Helmi is being kept?" the woman says, taking a step forward.

The conversation is now open. I can't believe I'm speaking with the gods for the second time in my life. It's clear to me that this is meant to be. They have come here for a reason, and that is to help. That is to free the world from the chains of this curse and then to liberate them from the demons of the underworld.

To protect the world from the underworld.

Chapter Forty-Two

HELMI

THE WHITE LIGHT VANISHES AS QUICKLY AS IT APPEARS. IN ITS place, Nilo, Lachlan, Percival, Runo, and Karo stand. I want to run to them. I want to hug Karo and tell him that I'm okay, but I don't, mainly because I can't.

The hissing serpent demon reaches out, wrapping his hand around my waist before he hauls me against his torso, using me as a shield. The only good thing is that I am facing Karo and can look into his eyes, hopefully expressing to him that I am okay in the moment.

The serpent *thing* is a coward. I would have never pegged this thing that I assume is the king of the underworld for being a coward, but here we are. A chicken to the highest degree, using me as a shield. So, I wonder offhandedly how deep that cowardice goes.

Karo growls, the sound bouncing off the walls around us.

I don't know how they got here, but I do not care. All I know is that they made it, and they will not quit. When I look at their weapons, I realize their swords are all a different glowing color. Red, blue, and green are what I see first, then there are white and gold.

"She is not yours to have, demon," Karo roars.

"But she isssss," the serpent hisses. I don't know his name, and I don't plan on finding out what it is either. In fact, I just

want to forget this whole thing has ever happened.

Karo shakes his head a couple of times, moving forward a step. “No,” he barks. “She is not.”

In the next breath, the men move forward. They are not playing around. They are not even going to have a conversation, which I’m glad for. I want this done. I want to go home. I want to start my life with Karo.

The bitchy witches lift their hands. Dark color begins flowing from them and straight toward the men. I open my mouth to tell them to watch out, but I don’t need to. The men immediately lift their shields, and the flowing colors slam into them and are easily deflected, bouncing off the sides.

They step forward as a single unit, their shields protecting their bodies. I try to jerk away from the snakelike man, but his grip on me tightens.

The bitchy witches get closer, their dark lights flowing even thicker and harder. Watching them, I wonder who is going to win this battle, then I pinch my eyes closed because I can’t think like that.

I must be positive.

Think positively.

“Open your eyessss,” the serpent hisses as he releases me.

I stumble backward, trying to get away from him, somehow knowing that if I do it now, he will, without a doubt, do something to me. But when I do open my eyes, I realize I am nowhere I want to be.

I’m back in the fucking tower.

That goddamn tower.

I am sick of it.

I hate this place.

I want to throw this demon thing out of the window.

“What do you want with me?” I ask.

“Everything,” he replies.

I want to tell him that he will get absolutely *nothing* from me. He's expecting everything, but I would rather die than give any part of me to some demon thing.

I don't say anything, though. Instead, I stare at him, expressionless. I don't really care what he thinks he's going to get from me, and even if he tries to take something, I will never give a damn thing to him. Not now, not ever

He takes a step forward, his snake tongue sliding out as he hisses, and I hold my breath as he lifts his hand to cup my face. I don't know why, but I expect his hand to be fiery hot. Instead, it's cold.

Although, I shouldn't be surprised because he is snakelike.

He leans forward, his face and mouth so close to mine that my breath hitches, and not in a sexy way. I can smell him. His scent is strong and causes my stomach to flip. He smells like charred toast and an old campfire.

"You will never be taken from me. This child is mine, Helmi. It is a demigod, and it will be in my possession after it has left your body. Once I have all three babies, all three demigods, it will give me the power I need to completely take over the entire world."

"Never," I hiss.

His lips curve up into a smirk. "Never?" he asks. "It sseemsss you do not realize that you are not in the position to say what you will or will not do. It sseemsss to me that there are no choices for you because I will not allow choices."

I want to keep myself in check. I don't want to say anything that is going to cause more problems. So, instead of saying anything, I take a step backward and shrug off his touch right as the door flies open.

I let out a sigh of relief at the sight of Karo walking into the room. I'm not sure where Nilo or anyone else is, but right now, I am so happy to have this man here with me. The serpent spins around, his back straightening as he lets out a cackling sound that I would otherwise describe as a laugh, but since he's a gigantic crazy asshole, it's a maniacal cackle.

“You will not live to see the end of this day, demon,” Karo growls.

“I am a king,” the serpent says. “You will respect me.”

Karo lets out a bark of laughter. “I, too, am a king, and you have shown me no respect at all whatsoever. Therefore, I have none to give in return.”

Without another word, Karo lifts his shield and extends his sword before he charges the serpent. He’s anticipating the attack, though, and I watch as the serpent lifts his hands. His palms face Karo, and bright red light flows from them, slamming into Karo’s shield.

I don’t know what comes over me, but it is consuming. My back arches and my hands lift without my brain telling them to. Closing my eyes, I feel the magic flow through me. It tingles throughout my entire body. Urgency fills me as I know that Karo may not be able to hold this demon thing off for long.

He’s a god.

He wants my child, he wants to kill my husband, and he wants my friends’ children.

I refuse.

I will fight.

KARO

THE SERPENT DEMON GOD THROWS HIS BLOODRED MAGIC AT me, and I deflect it using my shield, but then something happens. Bracing my feet, I wait for the next step, knowing he will send something stronger than just his flowing magic. It doesn’t happen.

A pained sound fills the room, bouncing off the wall, and I shift my shield down slightly so I can peer over the top of it. The demon god is on his knees. A sound akin to extreme pain fills the space, a wail, a whimper, a screeching cry, and I wonder if the demon witches are feeling the same thing.

Helmi holds fast, her magic pouring from her, though I'm unsure of how she's controlled it. Instead of asking questions, I charge the demon god with the sword that was given to me by the gods and force it deep inside his chest.

His screeching stops, but his whimpering continues. I twist the sword before I remove it from his chest and hold the blade to his throat. His eyes are wide as he stares up at me as if he is shocked that this could happen to him.

"The gods have blessed us beyond measure," I say. "Not only with destined brides and babies but also with weapons to win this war. You will not triumph. You will only lose."

Without another word, I slide the sword across his throat and listen to his gurgling as his blood sprays all over my face and chest. I am so amped up that I feel like I could beat my chest with my fists at this very moment.

I don't do that.

Once his body falls to the floor, I watch him for a moment to ensure he is indeed dead before I raise my gaze to find Helmi. She's staring at his dead body, her eyes wide, her hands still half suspended as if she is going to use her magic again at any given moment.

Swiftly, I walk toward her and wrap her in my arms, and although I'm covered in blood, I haul her body against mine before I slam my mouth down against hers. She whimpers, her lips parting, and I slide my tongue inside of her mouth to taste her.

A taste that I thought, once again, I'd lost forever.

Lifting, I break the kiss before I rest my forehead against hers and let out a heavy sigh. She doesn't speak, her hands fisting my tunic as she holds me close. Her body trembles against mine, and I wish I could kill the serpent again.

"I will destroy every tower in Maallapo," I rasp.

Helmi shifts back slightly, her eyes searching mine before her lips curve up into a smile. "Aren't we down below... in, you know... hell?" she asks.

I grin. “We aren’t. We are at the same tower where you were hidden before, except this time, they had a protection barrier around it so it could not be seen by the naked eye. They may be powerful, but they aren’t very creative.”

I cup her cheeks as I stare into her eyes for a long moment. She smiles, but I can tell she is worried, likely thinking of her brother and the others. Shifting closer to her, I touch my mouth to hers in a gentle kiss before I take a step backward.

My hands fall from her face, but I take her hand in mine and guide her out of the room and toward the others. If they haven’t finished those witches off by now, they’re probably all dead.

When we get to the basement room where the fight was taking place before I left, I find the men are all hunched against the wall and the witches are sprawled out dead on the floor.

Good.

As they should be.

“Does this mean it’s over?” Helmi whispers beside me.

Turning my head, I look down into her eyes and give her a smile. “I think it does, *rakas*.”

She lets out a sigh of relief, and in that moment, the others realize her presence and surround us, Nilo wrapping her in a big hug.

This is it.

This is the end of this war.

I would like to think this is the end of all wars, but I know that this world, like any world, will have trials and tribulations. But at least they will not come in the form of a worldwide curse set forth by the gods of the underworld and the gods from *Ylien*... from above.

A flash of white light surrounds us, and in the blink of an eye, we are back in Percival and Soleil’s chambers. The women cry out, hugging one another, but I turn to where the

gods were when we left, and as if they were summoned, they appear.

As if we are the ones being called forward, Percival and Lachlan make their way to my side, and together, we walk toward the gods. They dip their chins in a respectable soft bow, then lift their gazes to meet ours.

“You have done well, the three kings of legend,” one of the gods states.

“Is this done?” Percival asks.

The gods incline their heads as if they are a single unit. The one in front moves forward, stopping as she lifts her hand, and a golden glow surrounds us before it slides throughout our bodies. I’m filled with a sense of peace and calmness, and I know that the mission is complete.

It is done.

Epilogue

KARO

ONE YEAR LATER

THE BABE CRIES. HELMI BEGINS TO STIR, BUT I AM OUT OF BED before she can even think to throw the blanket off her body. It's cold in Maapallo this time of year, and while I've kept the fire burning in our chamber, the floors are still cold to the feet.

Moving to the cradle that is close enough to the fire to feel the heat but not close enough for an ember to pop out on the baby that is nestled inside, I reach down and wrap my hands around the infant's body.

I pick him up and hold him in my arms, feeling his small body against my chest. He ceases his crying. Instead, his cries turn to coos, and I smile at the little prince. I did not think I could love a being as much as I love this little bundle in my arms.

Moving through the chamber, I make my way over to the side of the bed and grin at the sight of Helmi, who is sitting up with her back against the wooden headboard, waiting for us to arrive.

"You didn't need to get up. I know you have a busy day tomorrow," she whispers.

"We both have a busy day. Besides, it is too cold for you to walk around. You will catch a sickness."

She rolls her eyes and holds out her hands. Handing the babe to her, I watch as she prepares for him to suckle. I'm not sure that I ever thought I would find this as beautiful as I do. It is natural, of course, but beautiful? I did not think of anything quite the way I do now.

"We do have a busy day, don't we?" she asks on a whisper.

"Indeed."

Tomorrow, Nilo marries the healer, Anja. Their wedding will be a small ceremony and a celebration feast. The feast is because we have defeated the underworld. It's been months, and there hasn't been as much as a hint of a disturbance.

So, we will celebrate and thank the gods for their help. We will also introduce the babe to his people for the first time. A demigod in his own right, this child will rule the country when the time is right, just like Percival and Lachlan's princes will do the same.

"Do you think they are meant for more?"

"They?" I ask.

"The babies. The way the serpent said that they were demigods, I wonder if there is more to come for them, and I'm worried," she murmurs.

I cannot blame her for being concerned. I feel the same way, though I would never tell her that. Instead, I reach over and slide my hand over his soft head. My sweet babe. Lifting my gaze to meet hers, I shake my head once, my lips curving up into a smile.

"They are meant for everything, *rakas*. These babes will rule the world, and they will do it together. They are bound not by blood but by something deeper. We will ensure that they come together and stay together. They are brothers."

She dips her chin in a nod. I lean forward to touch my lips to hers. Sitting back, I watch her for a few more moments until she is finished, then I change the babe and place him back in his cradle. He coos, happily sated as he falls back asleep.

I return to the bed, slip between the blankets, and gather Helmi in my arms, pulling her against my chest. She wraps her arm around me, her cheek resting on my chest as she lets out a heavy sigh.

Running my fingers through her hair, I close my eyes, but it seems as if she is not ready to go back to sleep yet. She lifts her head to rest it against my chest as she looks up at me. Smiling, I tip my chin slightly so I can look into her eyes.

“Why are you so good to me?” she asks.

“Good to you?”

Helmi’s lips twitch into a small smile. “I’ve read books and paid attention in history classes. Men in your position are not usually so sweet, caring, or hands-on with babies. I’m just wondering, is this normal in your world or is this unusual?”

Chuckling, I grasp the back of her hair, gripping it tightly as I tug her head back slightly, watching her neck arch before I speak. “It is normal for you and me, and that is all that matters. I enjoy my life with you, my bride. I would want this no other way.”

“Me too,” she whispers. “I was just curious.”

Releasing her, I sit up slightly and touch my lips to her forehead. “For curiosity’s sake, no, it is not normally done. Then again, none of my ancestors married a woman from another world. Or had her taken from them more than once and hidden away by the evil creatures of the underworld. So, I would say there is no telling how they would have reacted had those things happened.”

“Do you miss them?” she asks, quickly changing subjects.

“Them?”

I have a feeling she is going to ask about my parents, and I can’t help but frown at the thought, not because of mine, but because of hers. “I cannot bring your parents here, *rakas*. I could not even bring your brother. That was the gods, and only because it was his destiny.”

She lets out a sigh, then lays her head down again on my chest. “I know,” she exhales. “It’s just... I would like them to meet Eerik.”

“Would that not be something? For our parents to meet this demigod we have brought into this world. This perfect being that is half you, half me, and blessed by the gods.”

“It would,” she exhales.

My arms tighten around her. “Sleep, *rakas*.”

“I love you, Karo,” she breathes.

“And I, you, my bride.”

No other words need to be said. Our lives are different from what we could only have imagined in our wildest dreams, and yet they are perfect for us. Every single moment, even the ones that were terrifying. They did nothing but bring us *and the others* closer together.

If I could give Helmi something, it would be peace when it comes to her parents. However, that isn’t possible. I will endeavor to love her enough for all three of us, her parents and me. I’ve already sent messages and letters to powerful witches in lands that are not necessarily allies. I will do what needs to be done to ease my wife’s unease.

I will find a way.

Until then, I will simply give her every ounce of love, attention, and care a man can possibly give a woman. It is an easy task, as she is easy to love. Easy to care for. And in turn, she gives me love back easily, as well as smiles.

Helmi is everything I did not think I wanted. She is as opposite to me as a woman can be, even in worlds, and yet she is perfection. I would not wish my life to have happened in any other way except, perhaps, her kidnappings. I could have done without all of those.

HELMI

WALKING INTO THE ROOM, I SEE NILO STANDING IN THE middle, the men surrounding him. They all look at me and smile. I'm holding Eerik while I'm standing in the doorway. The men move toward me, and I step aside to let them pass, but Karo stops in front of me. He leans down and touches his lips to mine.

“Go and speak with your brother,” he murmurs, then slips past me.

One foot after the other, I make my way into the room and stand in front of my brother. He reaches for Eerik and takes him in his arms, dipping his chin and touching his lips to the baby's forehead.

“You shouldn't hold him. What if he spits up on your wedding suit?”

Nilo shakes his head. “I wouldn't care. It wouldn't fuckin' matter. Anja will marry me anyway. Plus, I feel like spit-up from a future king would be good luck or something.”

Laughing, I reach for the baby and take him in my arms. “Are you ready for this?” I ask.

He smiles, his eyes finding mine. “You know, I thought once the dust settled on the whole war with the gods and the underworld situation, I would be sent back. But every day, I woke up still here, and every day, I started to realize I didn't want to be sent back. Sure, I miss Mom and Dad, but life here is special.”

“It is, isn't it?” I ask. “When I first arrived, I didn't want to stay. I begged to go home, but when I realized that wasn't going to happen, I begged to have you brought here. They couldn't do anything. Finally, I was resigned to staying here. But then the gods brought you, and it seems as if this was truly where you were meant to be as well.”

“I think it is,” he agrees, his voice softer. “I love Anja. I didn't think I could really love someone the way I do her, but I do. She makes me happy.”

“I'm happy, too. I love that you've found her and you're staying here with me.” I give him a big smile.

There is a knock on the door before Timo sticks his head in. Turning, I look at him as he speaks. “It is time for the ceremony to begin,” he calls out.

I shift my attention to meet Nilo’s again, give him a wink, and take a step backward. “It’s time, Nilo. Time to start the rest of your life.”

He lets out a chuckle. “I can’t wait,” he rasps.

Turning around, I slip out of the chamber. Timo guides me to Karo, who is waiting for me in front of the closed chapel doors. While I keep Eerik close to my chest, Karo takes my arm as music starts to play and the doors open.

There ceremony is to begin.

It’s not exactly like a wedding back in our world, but it’s close enough, and I’m surprised, considering I wasn’t here for my own wedding, so I have no idea what to expect. I’m excited and also glad I don’t have to be the center of attention for this event.

There are people standing on each side of an aisle, with a man standing at the front. He’s wearing robes and a tall skinny hat that is bejeweled with dangly things and what appears to be green emeralds.

I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I assume this is the officiant. Karo turns his head, bending slightly to whisper in my ear, “Thank you for being here in this world with me, Helmi, and for bringing such joy to my darkness.”

Tears instantly spring to my eyes. I turn my head and look at him. He gives me a wink and then faces the wedding guests as we continue to move forward. I do the same, but my heart beats a bit faster, my world even brighter from his words.

This is the life I was destined to have. The world I was meant to be in. As we move through the crowd, I see Runo and Kenna at the end. Their smiles from ear to ear greet us. These are the people I was meant to love.

FIVE YEARS LATER

SINKING DOWN ON THE SMALL BOAT'S SEAT, I HOLD EERIK'S hand with one hand and cradle Leka in my arms. Runo and Kenna are across from me, Kenna cradling her own bundle.

We had our babies just one month apart.

I am blessed to have so many playmates for my children. Cousins abound as Nilo, Anja, and their toddler twins are in the other boat headed for shore.

Karo is sitting on my other side, his arm sliding around my shoulder as he peers toward the shore. When I see them, my lips curve up into a huge smile. They have their own brood as well. Two fine young boys, three toddlers, and a baby between them.

Lachlan and Neòil, along with Percival and Soleil, wave in our direction. I want to jump into the water and swim after them. These boats are not moving fast enough.

“Äiti,” Eerik calls.

Turning away from the shoreline, I look down at him. He's got his nose scrunched, and he appears deep in thought.

“Eerik?” I murmur.

“Will they remember me?”

He's nervous. My lips twitch into a small smile, and I dip my chin in a single nod. “They will. They are your brethren. Your brothers.”

“Okay,” he says, although I don't think he believes me.

The boat pulls up to the shore, and Karo jumps out before he reaches for the baby, cradling her in his big arm, and then helps me out of the boat. In turn, I help Eerik out. I feel like a kid. I can't wait to run and hug my friends.

When I reach the women, we all three embrace. “Thank god,” Soleil whispers.

“I missed all of you so much. Three years is too long to wait,” Neòil says.

We step away from one another, and Soleil lets out a small laugh. Following her gaze, I look down at the children.

The boys.

The demigods.

They stare at one another, and then, as if the spell is broken, they all laugh and hug before their chatter begins. All the fathers have made sure that the children know one another's languages so they can always talk to each other.

It's beautiful.

Future kings.

Future leaders.

But what is the most breathtaking thing about it all?

"Friends," Soleil breathes.

"Brothers," I correct.

Neòil looks up at us, unshed tears in her eyes. "It's perfect."

And it is. It's like nothing I could have ever imagined. It's beautiful and perfect in so many different ways. "Oh, before I forget," Neòil says. She reaches into the pocket of her dress and pulls out a folded piece of paper before thrusting it gently in my direction. "It's from Ferelith."

Taking the paper from her, I unfold it slowly and press my lips together in a straight line as I begin to read the note.

Dearest Helmi,

Dad and I always knew that you were meant for something greater than this world. Who knew how right we were? I can't deny that we don't miss you and Nilo with every single part of us.

But Ferelith explained everything to us, and it seems as if this is where you both truly belong. You're a queen. I can't even believe it. A true queen married to a king. We also hear that you have children now. I wish I could see them just once.

God, but we are so happy for you, even if we selfishly wish that your joy was found here in this world. I could write you a whole book, but I won't.

I'll just end this letter with a quote.

"We loved with a love that was more than love." -Edgar Allan Poe.

Love,

Mom + Dad

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About the Author

As an only child, Hayley Faiman had to entertain herself somehow. She started writing stories at the age of six and never really stopped.

Born in California, she met her now husband at the age of sixteen and married him at the age of twenty in 2004. After all of these years together, he's still the love of her life.

She now lives in East Texas with her family!

Most of Hayley's days are spent taking care of her two boys, going to sports practices, or helping them with homework. Her evenings are spent with her husband and her nights—those are spent creating alpha book boyfriends.



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SAVAGE BEAST MC —

[UnScrew Me](#)

[UnBreak Me](#)

[UnChain Me](#)

[UnLeash Me](#)

[UnTouch Me](#)

[UnHinge Me](#)

[UnWreck Me](#)

[UnCage Me](#)

Unfit Hero Series —

[CONVICT](#)

[HERO](#)

[FRAUD](#)

[KILLER](#)

[COWBOY](#)

Zanetti Famiglia Series —

[Becoming the Boss](#)

[Becoming his Mistress](#)

[Becoming his Possession](#)

[Becoming the Street Boss](#)

[Becoming the Hitman](#)

[Becoming his Wife](#)

[Becoming her Salvation](#)

Prophecy Sisters Series —

[Bride of the Traitor](#)

[Bride of the Sea](#)

[Bride of the Frontier](#)

[Bride of the Emperor](#)

Astor Family Series —

[Hypocritically Yours](#)

[Egotistically Yours](#)

[Matrimonially Yours](#)

[Occasionally Yours](#)

Nasty Bastards MC —

[Ruin My Life](#)

[Tame My Life](#)

[Start My Life](#)

[Dance into My Life](#)

[Shake Up My Life](#)

[Repair My Life](#)

[Sweeten My Life](#)

[Wrap Up My Life](#)

Underworld Sinners—

[Stolen by the Sinner](#)

[Bound to the Sinner](#)

[Caught by the Sinner](#)

[F*cked by the Sinner](#)

[Stripped by the Sinner](#)

[Rejecting the Sinner](#)

[Loved by the Sinner](#)

Devil's Hellions MC —

[Dirty Perfect Storm](#)

[Cocky Perfect Storm](#)

[Taboo Perfect Storm](#)

[Wicked Perfect Storm](#)

Awakened Curses —

[Vow to a King](#)

[Vow to a Tyrant](#)

[Vow to a Rogue](#)

Offspring Legends—

[Between Flaming Stars](#)

[Beautiful Unwanted Wildflower](#)

Esquire Black Duet Series –

[DISCOVERY](#)

[APPEAL](#)

Forbidden Love Series —

[Personal Foul](#)

[Kinetic Energy](#)

Standalone Titles

[Royally Relinquished: A Modern Day Fairy Tale](#)